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ABSTRACT

Most of America's newest college students are the white sons and daughters of blue collar workers who, because of increased college access, are often poor students academically as well as poor students financially. Colleges must be prepared to offer these students a new kind of learning experience to make freedom of access to college more than a hollow victory. An evaluation of the new students' family background, past educational experience, attitudes and values, and educational interests has been made to pave the way for innovation in the educational system, and findings show that a proposal for an effectively implemented student-centered curriculum is in order. (HS)

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NEW STUDENTS OF THE '70s

K. PATRICIA CROSS

America's newest college students are not necessarily black or brown or red; most of them are the white sons and daughters of blue-collar workers. The young people who did not attend colleges in the 1950s and '60s, but who will enter college in increasing numbers in the 1970s and '80s are distinguished not by their color so much as by their past experience with failure in the American school system. The greatest single barrier to college admission in the 1960s was lack of demonstrated academic ability—as that ability is nurtured and measured in the schools. College entrance has become commonplace for students demonstrating above-average academic performance: toward the end of the 1960s nearly three-quarters of those ranking in the upper academic half among high school graduates were entering college—even if they ranked in the lowest quarter on socioeconomic measures (Cross, 1971). As the country continues the move toward increased college access, it is lower-half students who constitute the available reservoir of new students to higher education: poor students *academically* and—more often than not—poor students *financially*.

Strangely enough, the influx of low-achieving students into higher education is a fact that has been faced more squarely in practice than in theory. While almost all public community colleges practice open admissions, and 80 percent of them have faced the reality of this policy by instituting special programs for students who do not have the academic backgrounds for college work, the *concept* of open-door admissions continues to be controversial. The open admissions program of the City University of New York sparked a recent headline in *TIME* magazine reading, "Open Admissions: American Dream or Disaster?". Professional journals discuss *whether* college is for everyone. The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education (1970) treads water on the issue by making a somewhat labored distinction between universal *access* (which they favor) and universal *attendance* (which they oppose).

Even as the issue of universal higher education continues to be debated, the practices of open admissions colleges have moved us beyond academic meritocracy (access on the basis of proven academic merit) into academic egalitarianism (access without regard to past achievement). They are here—the new students of the seventies. What do we know about their past learning experiences, aspirations, attitudes, and interests? Are colleges prepared to offer them a new kind of learning experience that is sufficiently different from what they have had for the past 17 years to make freedom of access to college more than a hollow victory?

In launching a major new research thrust directed toward the development of educational programs for new students, the Center for Research and Development in Higher Education began with a study of the characteristics of high school students who ranked among the lowest academic third of the high school graduates. At present over half of these students are planning to continue their education beyond high school—many of them in two- or four-year colleges.

In conducting the study, which was sponsored by the Center, Educational Testing Service, and the College Entrance Examination Board, the author made secondary analyses of data already available from four large national studies of the abilities, attitudes, and aspirations of senior high school students and entering community college freshmen.* "New" students were defined as those scoring in the lowest third on tests of academic aptitude, whereas "traditional" students were considered to be those in the top third—the group that has traditionally been considered "college material." The four samples were not designed to be comparable; the criterion tests were not the same; the data were collected at different periods between 1961 and 1969; but across the four studies the characteristics of the lowest-third students are remarkably

*Data used came from Project TALENT, SCOPE, the Comparative Guidance and Placement Program (CGP) and the Educational Testing Service Growth Study. For this article the data source will be identified in parantheses following specific findings. The characteristics of the samples plus further elaboration of the findings regarding new students are presented in *Beyond the Open Door* (Cross, 1971).

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similar. It is thus possible to present a composite profile of the new students that are challenging the traditional practices of higher education. The following capsule profile is abstracted from the complete study released in book form this fall (Cross, 1971).

FAMILY BACKGROUND

Two-thirds of the new students are first-generation college students; their fathers have never attended college. About the same proportion of fathers—two out of three—are blue-collar workers. Over half of the group are Caucasians with about a fourth Black and about 15 percent other minorities. One of the most persistent misunderstandings of the educational community as well as the broader society is that most "remedial" students are members of minority ethnic groups. It is just not true; the majority of lowest-third high school graduates are white. Most community colleges (64 percent) offering special programs for students who are poorly prepared academically report that fewer than one-fourth of the students enrolled in such programs are members of ethnic minorities. It is true, however, that the concern about the lack of academic preparation of ethnic minorities *is* well justified. Black Americans are very much over-represented among the new student population, with about two-thirds of the Blacks entering two-year colleges falling among the lowest academic third of the entering students. Mexican-Americans and American Indians are also over-represented among lowest-third students in community colleges.

Two other broad misunderstandings about the nature of the new student population should be corrected. First, the new student is more likely to be female than male as we approach universal access—simply because the pool of women who are not going to college is considerably larger than that for men, especially in the lower socioeconomic strata. For example, 75 percent of bright (top quarter) but poor (bottom SES quarter) males are entering college, compared with 60 percent of their equally able sisters. Second, there is a significant minority of relatively advantaged young people with poor academic records who are beginning to enter open-door colleges. About one quarter of the youth who constitute the lowest academic third are the children of fathers who have attended college. Individually and collectively their learning problems are as tragic—their sense of school failure is as pervasive—as those of their financially disadvantaged peers.

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Thus the new student of the 1970s falls into no such common stereotype as a Black ghetto male. As we move toward equality of access, new students become the one-third of the high school graduates who are not now continuing their education—predominantly those with a poor academic track record, and its all-too-frequent companion, low socioeconomic status.

PAST EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Moving through the American school system is a very different experience for top- and bottom-third students, and the gap between the academic performance of the two groups widens in absolute as well as relative terms as they proceed through school (Coleman, 1966; Cross, 1971). Most students who graduate from high school in the top-third of the class have been successful students all the way through school. Bottom-third students, on the other hand, have spent their formative years not simply in the bottom-third, but often worse yet, moving down toward it. Data collected over a period of five years from American teenagers (ETS Growth Study) show that out of every 100 top-third high school juniors, 87 were already in the top-third on national norms in the seventh grade, but for 100 lowest-third high school juniors only 52 had been in the lowest-third in seventh grade while 45 had been in the middle-third. Because attrition is academically selective, an average student in elementary school has a better chance of dropping to below average status among the more selective group of high school graduates than he has of improving his relative position. Why shouldn't lowest-third seventh graders learn to fear failure instead of expecting success? Holt (1970) presents a colorful description of the anxiety present in most American classrooms. When he asked elementary school children how they felt when the teacher asked them a question and they didn't know the answer, one boy "spoke for everyone" when he said in a loud voice "Gulp!"

> I asked them why they felt gulpish. They said they were afraid of failing, afraid of being kept back, afraid of being called stupid, afraid of feeling themselves stupid. Stupid. Why is it such a deadly insult to these children, almost the worst thing they can think of to call each other? Where do they learn this? [p.63].

One of the unintentional lessons learned by students who start their school careers handicapped by the lack of verbal and other academic skills is that failure is always reaching out to envelop them. The picture is not unlike that of a strong and a weak swimmer thrown into downstream currents above a waterfall. The strong swimmer soon swims to calm waters and begins to focus attention on how fast he can swim, while the weak swimmer is dragged into such swift currents that his only concern is to keep himself from going over the waterfall. In the language of psychology, the strong swimmer becomes achievement-motivated while the weak swimmer becomes fear-threatened. Future learning is structured differently for the two swimmers. And the effects are clearly evident by the time young people graduate from high school. Whereas a certain minority of young people confess that school makes them nervous, the proportion of lowest-third high school seniors admitting that they often feel nervous,

tense, or shy in class is almost double that for top-third students–38 percent to 21 percent (SCOPE data).

ATTITUDES AND VALUES

New students to higher education have measurably different perspectives on life and on learning from those held by traditional college students. While the attitudes of young people are usually attributed to home environments, students who are similar to each other on academic measures (top-third or bottom-third) are more likely to share common attitudes about school-related topics than are students who are similar to each other on socioeconomic measures (blue-collar or white-collar). For example, half of the new students score in the top-third on a scale measuring passivity compared with one-fourth of the traditional students (SCOPE data). Not only do new students mark questionnaires in a manner that reveals an inclination to be passive in learning situations, but those who work with them rank "lack of effort, has quit trying" as the major obstacle to learning for new students–rating it above poor home background, poor schooling, or low intelligence (Cross, 1971). Psychologists studying failure-threatened personalities (Atkinson & Feather, 1966; Seligman, 1969) have attributed the observed passivity to fear. And some of the attitudes of new students make good sense when viewed in the context of their school-failure experiences. Students who have learned through experience that failure in school is a more likely outcome than success seem to say, "If I don't try very hard, I can't fail very much."

Another characteristic that distinguishes new students from college students of the past is the lack of interest in intellectual pursuits. On all types of measures–leisure time activities, interest scales, hobby preferences, personality measures, or self-ratings of ability–new students express a preference for noncognitive activities. For example, on the Intellectual Disposition Scale of the Omnibus Personality Inventory (OPI) marked differences occur between top-third and bottom-third high school seniors, with 59 percent of the traditional college students scoring in the top-third on this scale of intellectual and scholarly interests compared with only 16 percent of the new students (SCOPE data). There are a few students who make low scores on traditional tests of academic ability who express an interest in scholarly ideas, but not many. There should be no surprise in the rather close relationship between school success and interest in school work. The present state of knowledge doesn't answer the question of whether lack of success results in lack of interest or whether lack of interest causes school failure, but by the time youngsters reach 17 or 18 years of age, it is reasonably certain that a self-defeating cycle of passivity and academic failure is well established.

Another OPI scale that shows large differences between top- and bottom-third high school seniors is one that is not directly related to school work or to study habits. The Autonomy Scale is a measure of authoritarianism, and on it, new students reflect a stereotype associated with blue-collar backgrounds. The items on the Autonomy Scale represent an especially good example of some of the issues around which the town-gown polarization has developed. Some of the

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attitudes that traditional students have most vociferously disavowed are held by substantial numbers of new students. Examples of some scale items are, "I am in favor of strict enforcement of laws no matter what." "It is never right to disobey the government." "More than anything else, it is good hard work that makes life worthwhile." On the Autonomy Scale new students express the attitudes of the broader public as opposed to those of students and faculty on more traditional college campuses. Fifty-eight percent of the new students show an inclination to respect the authority of American institutions and to agree with statements that make virtues of hard work and determination, in contrast to 15 percent of the traditional students (SCOPE data).

Young people holding the attitudes of "middle America"–a term frequently used in a pejorative way by intellectuals–may well find intolerance on traditional college campuses for their values and even for their backgrounds. Novak (1971) has written eloquently and angrily of the "relentlessly missionary" zeal with which liberal educators seek to "enlighten" those whose values differ from their own. "Why" Novak asks, "do the educated classes find it so difficult to want to understand the man who drives a beer truck, or the fellow with a helmet working on a site across the street with plumbers and electricians, while their sensitivities race easily to Mississippi or even Bedford-Stuyvesant?" Since among today's college administrators and faculty members there are few former remedial students, the problem of developing sensitivities to new students of the seventies is monumental.

What is the mission of higher education with respect to new students? Is it as simple as providing "remediation" until they are motivated and academically ready to learn what we have been teaching for generations to traditional college students? At present most liberal educators do indeed regard it as their mission to correct the "deficiencies" of new students, which really means making new students over into the image of traditional students, or better yet, into images of themselves. Perhaps the most irritating aspect of the conversion attempt is the well-meaning, condescending kindness which is used to assure new students that except for their "deprived" backgrounds, they too could be more like most college professors.

Almost all special programs presently offered new students can be classified under three major headings. There

are remedial courses to correct academic "deficiencies," counseling programs to correct motivational "deficiencies," and financial aids to correct financial deficiencies. The point is not that such programs are not necessary (although I question the methods and emphases of some), it is rather that they are not sufficient. To date, we have devoted no major attention at all to seeking out and capitalizing on the strengths of new students. When community colleges were asked to rank the goals of special programs for new students in order of importance, they gave "to prepare students for regular college work" top priority. Thus, even the colleges most nearly designed for new students fall victim to the notion that the task is to convert new students into acceptable candidates for traditional higher education. "Success" of the program is almost invariably measured in terms of retention in traditional colleges and grades in traditional courses. Justifiably, perhaps, we take pride in the rather small number of new students who make it in our system; we close our eyes to what, if anything, we've done for the overwhelming majority who experienced just one more failure in the American school system. Is anyone looking at the youngsters whose last excuses for not making it are removed by a benevolent society? What really happens to those who are given tutoring, counseling, money, and opportunity and still don't succeed in the American dream of a traditional college degree? If our task is not to convert new students to our version of the educated man or woman, what alternatives are there? What do new students say they want from education?

EDUCATIONAL INTERESTS

At this point, let the reader ask himself how he reacts to a college described as follows:

> At this college 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.

Does this sound like a succinct description of a desirable college? Not to new students, it doesn't. Only nine percent selected it as the college they would most like to attend (SCOPE data). More popular were descriptions that emphasized friendliness and vocational preparation. The friendly campus was first choice for 35 percent of the new students. As a matter of fact, it was very popular with top-third students too, with 61 percent favoring it. It was described as follows:

> At this college there are many activities and students are encouraged to take part. The professors go out of their way to make sure that students understand the classwork, and everyone is friendly on the campus.

While this easy-going non-threatening environment has a high appeal to young people of all levels of ability, the hard-working vocational model has special appeal for new students—and is not very popular among traditional students. Thirty-seven percent of the bottom-third students and 15 percent of the top-third expressed first preference for a college described as follows:

> At this college 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.

Superficially at least, this statement describes most community colleges. Since community colleges do serve large numbers of new students, it must be admitted that we are making some progress in providing for the expressed wishes of new students of the seventies. There is, however, considerable evidence that most community college faculty members continue to stress the most traditional aspects of their colleges (Cross, 1970).

Perhaps there really are other models of postsecondary education that are as challenging, as important to society, and as rewarding to the participants as the traditional college that was designed for students who excel in traditional academic subject matter by educators who excel in the same things. It is high time to balance our preoccupation with how well prepared new students are for the colleges with some real concern about how well prepared we are for the new students of the seventies.

A PROPOSAL

Let me offer a specific proposal for a basic reform that has broad implications for improving education for all students, but it has special relevance for creating a potent learning experience for new students.

The fundamental premise upon which my proposal is based involves an expanded definition of the functions of education. One function is to develop at least minimal competencies in the basic academic skills necessary for effective functioning in an increasingly sophisticated society. This we are trying hard to do. The second function, however, is to provide the opportunity for each individual to achieve a sense of competence and self-worth through accomplishment. In the long run, it is much more important to student development to provide the experiences that come from doing something really well—the self-discipline, the practice, the glow of accomplishment, the recognition from one's peers—than it is to prepare a remedial student to do barely acceptable work in English literature.

I believe that we must broaden the curriculum beyond the narrow dimensions of the academic disciplines and that we must expand the learning environment beyond the confinement of the classroom. We must make it both possible and necessary for individuals to take pride in high levels of achievement. Excellence becomes possible through centering our attention on the strengths of individuals; it becomes necessary through demanding high standards of performance. Our mistake in the past has been to emphasize the content

of learning while permitting great variation in performance. Everyone must read *Silas Marner*, we say, but we recognize that some will do it better than others. Suppose we recognized another priority and permitted maximum variation in the task to be performed but held all to high standards of achievement?

My proposal would involve the completion of one project each year by each student. Students would be encouraged to select a project central to their abilities and interests. Some students who are highly verbal and find great satisfaction in working in the library might elect the traditional task of preparing a paper on some topic of interest to them. Others who experienced their greatest satisfaction in working with people might choose to integrate textbook sociology with an action-oriented program in the community. Still others might feel that their greatest interest and talent lay in the fuller development of nonverbal abilities. Their projects might emphasize the creation of things–using metal, electronics, optical lenses, or musical notes. I contend that the greatest personal development takes place under the joint conditions of high motivation and high challenge to excellence. This vital learning experience is presently denied students with low and mediocre academic ability.

For their learning projects, students would select two appropriate advisors--at least one to be an on-campus educator. The other advisor might be an adult of recognized competence in the area. The proprietor of the local stereo-component store might team with an engineering professor to advise and evaluate the quality of a piece of electronic equipment designed and built by a student. An elementary school teacher and a professor of education might be the best advisors for a tutoring project involving ghetto children. A counselor from campus or community and a professor of anthropology might advise students interested in developing peer counseling programs for minority students facing problems of adjustment in a new campus culture. Projects might be individual or they might consist of teams of students. The focus would be on learning new skills, on creating new things, new models, new programs, and on high levels of performance. The goal is the integration of the content knowledge of higher education around a core of the individuals' interests and talents.

Such an apparently simple proposal has many implications. First, it provides a link between the classroom and the application of knowledge. This is especially important for socially-concerned students who grow restless and bored in the traditional classroom–a condition that robs them of the motivation and the challenge to excellence that are essential for self-development. Second, it builds upon the repeatedly-demonstrated fact that individual differences do indeed exist. An egalitarianism that forces all people to achieve along a single dimension, seems to me sheer folly; it is inevitable that some will always be above-average while others will always be below-average. We must seek equality in high development of diverse talents rather than in highly diverse performance of unidimensional talents.

Third, the proposal to capitalize on strengths instead of emphasizing weakness, implies that we can help students to identify their unique strengths and that we can design appropriate educational experiences that lead to personal development. This is a bit more complicated. It means that we need new efforts in testing, guidance, and research. Research shows that many new students traveling through the school system at the bottom of the class have grown so accustomed to thinking of themselves as "below average" people that they will have difficulty assessing their strengths. New instruments and new emphases in guidance will be required. The counseling school of thought that seeks client insight to self-knowledge through probing backgrounds for psychological trauma in infancy or through understanding the origin of poor relationships with father, or through any other means that assumes that the purpose of counseling new students is to focus upon mental illness rather than mental health, must be turned around to emphasize the healthy aspects of one's environment that might furnish the basis for unique strengths.

While a proposal for a student-centered curriculum is not new, it has rarely been implemented effectively–largely, I suspect, because inadequate attention has been given to securing the commitment and the cooperation of the entire educational community. Counselors must find new ways to help students identify and develop their best talents. Teachers must be willing to work with students on a one-to-one basis as they assume major responsibility for one important, if not *the* important aspect of their educations. Students must be willing to demand of themselves their highest level of achievement. Administrators must be willing to depart from the safety of doing what prestige institutions are doing–concentrating on the preparation of the elite few for graduate studies and research scholarship. Adults in the community must be willing to help in the education of their young people. It won't be easy. But it is time now to look hard at the central mission of higher education–the education of young people. I doubt that tinkering with the machinery that keeps the traditional curriculum running will furnish adequate power to propel us into the decades ahead.

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