DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 068 030 HE 003 473

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TITLE Student Task Force: An Experiment in Interdisciplinary Education.
INSTITUTION Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, New York, N.Y.
PUB DATE May 72
NOTE 16p.; An Occasional Paper from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Drug Abuse; Drug Addiction; Drug Education; *Experimental Programs; *Higher Education; Human Services; *Interdisciplinary Approach; *Narcotics; Program Evaluation; Student Organizations

ABSTRACT

During the first semester of the 1971-72 academic year, students at 7 universities located in urban areas across the U.S. participated in an interdisciplinary program that was designed to help the students develop problem-solving techniques. The particular problem that the students attacked was that of drug addiction. This problem incorporated the fields of sociology, social psychology, economics, public administration, political science, and the health sciences. Students studied the use of heroin in their own cities and the methods being taken to combat heroin use, and made recommendations based on their findings designed to solve or to ameliorate the heroin use in that city. (HS)

Student Task Forces: an Experiment in Interdisciplinary Education

An Occasional Paper from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation

by HARRY WEINER

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What does one need to know in order to solve, or to try to solve, some of the problems of real life? How shall this knowledge be learned, and how taught? Students and teachers ask themselves these questions and while to some of us such questions may seem rhetorical, or simple, to others, especially to the young, they are poignant. Knowledge has been successfully brought to bear on problems of industrial productivity, and the mastery of space and time, but the list of societal problems that resist solution seems to grow constantly. No wonder, then, that there is skepticism among the young about the value of investing time and effort to acquire knowledge. The temptation is strong to substitute emotion for analysis, slogans for policies. And this skepticism is seen increasingly in those schools where heretofore confidence in applied knowledge has been almost unbounded: in the graduate and professional schools of large universities.

To students at seven universities* who wanted to seriously examine the question of the knowledge needed to attack a specific problem, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation lent support during the first semester of the 1971–72 academic year. The student task forces, as they called themselves, selected the problem of heroin addiction as the one on which they would work. Heroin was chosen because it is a significant problem, not a made-up classroom exercise, and is a problem not divisive on political or philosophic grounds: virtually everyone agrees that less heroin usage is better than more.

Each student task force had a faculty advisor whose main responsibility was to help the students cross the boundaries of university departments and intellectual disciplines. The administration at each of the seven universities agreed to give formal course credit for work on the task forces. One of the task forces

* American University, University of California at Berkeley, Harvard University, University of Pennsylvania, University of Southern California, Southern Methodist University, Washington University of St. Louis.

began from a nucleus of students in the field of sociology, another from public administration, a third from health sciences. All quickly attracted students from a variety of disciplines and professional programs. The task forces ranged in size from five to over twenty.

A few weeks before the Fall semester began, all of the faculty advisors met in Cambridge, Massachusetts for a two-day seminar led by Howard Raiffa, professor of Managerial Economics at Harvard University, and Mark H. Moore, a graduate student at Harvard whose policy research on the heroin problem has attracted praise from both academics and government officials. The group examined and discussed a range of analytic techniques, shared a basic bibliography of the literature of drug addiction, and agreed on a general symmetry of approach that would allow them to later compare their findings. Each task force would examine the heroin problem in the urban area in which its university was located, evaluate policies and programs already underway, and, if they chose, make policy recommendations, based upon their findings, designed to solve or to ameliorate the heroin problem in that area.

At the end of the semester, the task forces prepared written reports of their findings and recommendations. Each task force report was circulated among the other task forces, and the project culminated in a session attended by representatives of each task force, the faculty advisors, and a panel of experts. The function of the panel of experts was to engage in a constructively critical dialogue with the students about their findings and recommendations, how these had been arrived at and on what they were based, how they might be improved and how they might be developed further.

Professor James Q. Wilson, Chairman of the Department of Government at Harvard, was named chairman of the panel. Other members were:

Dr. Beny J. Primm, Director of Addiction Research and Treatment Corporation, Brooklyn, New York

Max Singer, President, Hudson Institute
Herbert Sturz, Executive Director, Vera Institute
Aaron Wildavsky, Dean, School of Public Policy, University of California, Berkeley

Between the time the student groups began their work in September 1971 and their final meeting at Chicago on March 24 and 25, 1972 with the panel of experts, the problem of heroin use continued to bedevil American society. The President of the United States created a Special Action Office for Drug Abuse Prevention directly attached to his personal staff. To its Director, Dr. Jerome H. Jaffe, the Congress gave significant authority over the spending of almost a billion dollars over three years. On the law enforcement side, the President created the position of Special Assistant Attorney General specifically aimed at the traffic in hard drugs, especially heroin. In early February, 1972, four major foundations announced that they were combining resources to form the Drug Abuse Council, to finance research that might offer new approaches to the problem. Thus, if any of the students had had doubts about the relevance of their work, these were laid to rest.

The reports and recommendations of the seven student task forces when completed in February 1972 totalled several thousand pages, and the discussions about and beyond the reports that took place among representatives of the task forces and the panel filled the two days of the March 24–25 meeting in Chicago. The remainder of this paper is a distillation of, and commentary on, the work produced by this project.

The format of the meeting of students, faculty advisors, and panelists was that of a large seminar, designed to facilitate direct exchanges of information and viewpoint. All the participants at the meeting, including the panel, made clear at the start that they considered themselves students of the heroin problem rather than experts on it. They agreed that the body of knowledge and the degree of understanding of the problem of drug usage is far from what they would like it to be, especially

for the purpose of formulating public policy. At the same time, none of the participants was brand new to the subject; all shared a knowledge of the academic literature on the heroin problem. Further, each student task force has gone beyond that initial body of shared knowledge to examine the problem in a specific locale. By bringing diverse experiences together, answering some of the basic questions, providing partial answers to others, they might be able to advise on which among the still unanswerable questions are the most important and therefore deserving of the most time and attention in the future. Further, by looking closely and frankly at what remained unknown or unclear about the heroin problem, some light might well be thrown on the fundamental question of what the student needs to know and how he can best learn it.

The procedure of the meeting was to throw out questions and compare the findings on that question that each of the task forces had arrived at.

Question: *Why should the problem of hard drugs, such as heroin, be accorded an especially high priority? Why should scarce human and financial resources be allocated to the amelioration of this particular problem, rather than to another?*

The first part of the answer provided by the student task forces went to the familiar field of the high cost of crime. Once the parameters were set of the dollar cost to American society of crime committed by addicts, other aspects of the question were examined. The costs and benefits of confinement, of treatment, of rehabilitation were examined, leading to an elaboration of the other costs to society of heroin addiction not so easily quantifiable, but nonetheless important. Heroin harms the whole of society. Museums, parks, subways, and other public goods in large cities are today substantially under-utilized because people fear they will encounter addicts in those places and perhaps be the victims of crimes. Heroin can corrupt police, and provide organized crime with a flow of revenue that finances the expansion of many kinds of criminal activity. Society suffers from the damage that individuals inflict on themselves. Talent and even genius occur

in all sectors of society, but society is denied their contribution if heroin gets to them first. And philosophy and morals enter the equation: addiction is incompatible with our notions of the dignity and value of man, of man as a free maker of his own decisions.

Question: *What are the objectives of public policies aimed at the heroin problem? What is it that we would like to happen?*

Here the student task forces were required by the logic of the question to state an ideal objective and then proceed to setting specific values on several "second-best" solutions. The ideal would be for every person presently using heroin to stop that usage totally, and for no one to start using heroin. Given that this objective is not achievable, the next order of objectives was: 1) to prevent insofar as possible the spread of heroin addiction to new users; 2) to reduce the amount of crime stemming from heroin use; 3) to reduce the numbers of people presently using heroin; 4) to increase the number of addicts involved in some kind of rehabilitation program.

Question: *How many heroin users are there? Is the number growing at an increasing rate?*

This fundamental question brought the task forces face-to-face with the constant dilemma of the makers of public policy: formulating assumptions and designing policies on the basis of insufficient information. Heroin users are not a population that stands still in order to be counted. Assessments of the situation and policies aimed at improving that situation depend upon estimates of numbers. And the estimates must be qualitative as well as quantitative. From what sectors of the population are new "recruits" to heroin usage most likely to come? Middle-class high school students? Residents of the ghetto? Vietnam veterans? In the absence of government programs, how many people might find their way out of addiction other than by dying? Important assumptions have been made and large sums of money spent or committed on the basis of estimates of heroin usage that do not draw sufficiently on the techniques made available by the work

of academic statisticians and the technology of computation. Some student task forces concentrated their studies on this area. The Harvard task force, for example, concluded that the number of heroin users in the city of Boston in 1971 was somewhat less than 6,000, and that while still increasing, was doing so at a markedly slower rate than in previous years. This estimate of size and situation of the heroin problem differs from that made in the past by a number of appointed and elected officials. The Harvard students worked closely with city, state, and federal officials in working up their estimates and may well have some influence on estimating techniques used in the future.

Question: *What is the principal mechanism by which heroin use spreads?*

There was agreement among the task forces that the way most new users are introduced to heroin is through close friends and relatives. At variance with the traditional view of the "pusher" preying upon innocents, this insight was most clearly brought out in a survey of high school students in the Philadelphia area conducted by the University of Pennsylvania student task force, and supported by the findings of others. Recognition of the paramount role of peer pressure in experimenting with heroin has significant policy ramifications, particularly regarding expectations and expenditures for education and prevention programs. The decision to experiment with heroin, or not to, is evidently not an independent or individual one. The power of posters, lectures, leaflets, study courses, television commercials, etc. is unlikely to match that of the potential addict's close friends and family members unless the effort is massive (and thus expensive) and comes early: if a community decides to invest in a drug education program only at the point when heroin usage has already become noticeable, it is probably locking the stable door after the horses are gone.

Question: *How effective an instrument can law enforcement be in achieving the objectives of heroin policy?*

Although the task forces were not unanimous on this point, there was considerable support for increasing and improving law

enforcement efforts, based on the findings of some students that the deterrent effect of apprehension and conviction, and the disruption of the supply of heroin by the police, have important effects on curbing the spread of heroin use. The students did not agree with the view held by some law enforcement officials that arrests of "higher-ups" in the heroin distribution system are *ipso facto* more effective than large-scale harassment of small-time street corner dealers. Noting that initial access seems to be significant in whether or not experimentation with heroin takes place, they recommended a mixture of enforcement tactics designed to make the location of heroin for sale sufficiently expensive and time-consuming as to discourage the new user and to divert his attention to other activities. Thus, systematic, regular enforcement efforts that change the index of access from X dollars per bag of heroin available to the buyer in Y hours, to 3X and 3Y, can be effective in checking the epidemic effects of heroin usage. If attractive alternatives to heroin experimentation are made more accessible, while heroin is made less accessible, even small changes in that ratio can have large beneficial effects.

Question: *How closely are crime and heroin addiction related?*

The students agreed that the relationship is close, but pointed out the dangers in basing policy on an oversimplified model of this relationship. A sharp drop in the price of heroin, such as might occur if heroin became available legally, would certainly result in less crime, but how much less is open to question. It would depend to a considerable degree on the ways the addict could find to use his time and energy. If the former heroin user finds no attractive alternatives, he may continue to be involved in crime at some level lower than before but higher than if he found the straight life attractive.

Question: *Should public money aimed at rehabilitation be spent mainly on methadone programs or on psychotherapeutic, drug-free programs?*

The task forces felt this was not the real question, because it is an apples-and-oranges comparison. Some heroin users will be

better off in a methadone program, others in a psychotherapeutic program. It would be unwise to decide, at least at present, that one mode of treatment is undeserving of public funds compared with the other. The students cautioned against methadone programs if they are not complemented by a wide range of rehabilitative services, and against therapeutic communities that do not meet standards of accountability and effectiveness.

Question: *What are the political and bureaucratic prerequisites for achieving policy objectives?*

Almost all the task forces recommended the establishment of coordinating mechanisms, or the improvement of existing ones, and on this point there was a measure of disagreement between the students and the panel.

The Southern Methodist University task force recommended the coordination at a regional level of therapeutic communities. Similarly, American University recommended that regional coordination would have the benefit of reducing the duplication of services and utilizing available resources to their maximum effect. The students from the University of Southern California noted a need for the coordination of programs and recommended the formation of a heroin addiction coordinating council, centered in a city department of mental health. The University of Pennsylvania task force stated that there was a current absence of effective coordination at the city level in Philadelphia and recommended that the Division of Addictive Diseases be vitalized for this purpose. The Harvard Students described the present state of coordination of drug programs in Boston as "chaotic." That task force recommended the expansion of the staff of the Mayor's Coordinating Council on Drug Abuse and assignment to that staff of responsibility for program evaluation, although recommending against creating strong coordinating controls, in view of "the present state of ignorance with regard to the efficacy of various treatment modalities."

Task forces also stressed the need for more data in standardized usable form, particularly to make possible the evaluation of treatment, prevention and correction programs.

Members of the panel agreed on the principle of better coordination and avoiding wasteful duplication of programs, but pointed out that in practice "coordination" can become almost synonymous with "coercion." So long as large questions remain about which approaches and programs will be most effective, it is more efficient to accept as a necessity a period of overlapping efforts, of contrary philosophies and assumptions, rather than risk a failure of grand proportions by premature commitment to a single solution.

Question: *Is it advisable to experiment with a program of heroin maintenance?*

There was a considerable range of opinion on this question among the various task forces and within the task forces. Since consensus was not an objective, both sides were able to develop their positions fully.

One student on the University of Pennsylvania task force favored experimenting with heroin maintenance. He described heroin as "the drug of choice which has been most widely used in the past as well as presently by poor and minority peoples." Claiming that at present addicts have few beneficial treatment options open to them, he criticized methadone as being more addictive than heroin and harder to detoxify from. He offered as advantages of a system of controlled distribution: (1) the heroin user would no longer be a criminal; (2) a great source of illegal wealth would be destroyed; (3) street crime can be significantly reduced; (4) health problems of the addict can be reduced; (5) an accurate survey of heroin use can be made. He included in his proposal the provision to the addict of a wide range of treatment programs, to be used, or not, at the addict's discretion.

Other students demurred from this view, stating that the British experience with legalized dispensation to a few thousand addicts is not an appropriate model for the United States. The supposed advantages—reduced crime, improved addict health, elimination of lucrative illegal market in heroin—would in practice be less than imagined. To make real progress toward those objectives requires heavy investment of time and money in

improving society. Moreover, the immediate practical objection to a program of heroin maintenance is the damage that would be done to existing treatment programs of all types. Most heroin addicts seek rehabilitation when they become convinced that obtaining further supplies of heroin is too dangerous, too costly and generally unpromising for the future. The prospect of legalized dispensation weakens the attractiveness to the addict of treatment programs that do not provide the euphoria of heroin.

What was learned from the experience of the student task forces? With regard to the heroin problem itself no sensational findings were made, nor any magical recommendations. None were expected. At the same time, what the students found out, *inter alia*, about the importance of peer pressure in the spread of heroin use, and the deterrent effect on new users of making heroin purchases inconvenient and dangerous, is of genuine interest to policy researchers in this field.

The students shied away from the ethical dilemma which the heroin problem presents, and this was somewhat surprising since the dilemma is perhaps best stated in an analytic paradigm of the kind used as tools by the students: you cannot optimize your solution when you are trying to solve two problems at the same time. And the heroin problem is two problems: one is that of the damage wrought on the addict himself by the practice of using heroin, and the other is the damage to society caused by the addict. The principal manifestation of that damage is crime. To the extent we try to solve the crime problem by such solutions as heroin maintenance through legalized dispensation, we reduce our attention to, and responsibility for, reducing the number of heroin users and the amount of heroin used. We are, in the language of youth, "copping out." We are saying, in effect, "If what you want is to be stoned, it is all right as long as you don't break into my home." This motive underlies much of the enthusiasm for the rapid expansion of those methadone programs where the rehabilitative part of the treatment is given much lower priority than getting the addict onto the socially tran-

quilizing use of methadone. Conversely, if we take the view that it is the moral duty of the government, as the agent of society, to intervene in the lives of individuals, on the basis that society knows that it is good for them never to start using heroin, or, once started, to stop, then we must accept that the policy measures available to us, chiefly the law enforcement system, are at best incremental in their effects and therefore the crime bill will continue to be high, at least for the near future. There is no cheap solution that will let us feel both completely secure against addict crime and wholly at ease with our conscience.

Yet, while formal logic constrains us from optimal solutions to simultaneous problems, common sense tells us that the answer must be a weighted average. It is not in the nature of society to reach a decision on whether the addict should concern us more than his crime. We are simply required by reality to work with "second-best" solutions; we must go down both roads at once.

Perhaps more important is what was learned by students and universities about teaching and knowledge. The words "interdisciplinary" and "relevant" have been familiar for a long time; there is no claim of discovery here, only of reinforcement. Statistics as a social science was found by a great many of the students to be indispensable. On the other hand, a look at the course offerings in that field that the students turned to for help showed a tendency toward elegance and complexity that could exhaust most students long before they reached the point of being pronounced by the universities as qualified to use these tools. The students on the task forces concluded that solutions are best taught and learned if the problems to which they can be applied are revealed early rather than late. Economics and political science too came to be regarded by the students as fields where the application of theory does not have to be delayed until all of the theory in the field has been mastered. But even more strongly the point came home to the students that without the knowledge of those fields the would-be reformer goes to the battle too poorly armed to do any good. Change in the

supply of heroin has ramifications for the demand for heroin: those who would gain insight to be applied to policy must understand the use of the curves and function that economics offers to describe and predict such changes. Some governmental organizations and programs succeed while others fail; political science provides the means not only to predict such outcomes but to affect them.

The work of the task forces also threw light on the degree to which professional and graduate curricula could benefit from enrichment. Some of the students, for example, came from programs of study in the health sciences. The facts of the pharmacology of heroin usage were easy for them to acquire, but to understand its epidemiology they needed to construct conceptual and mathematical models of the process and then make the model real with knowledge drawn from sociology and social psychology. Those students with backgrounds in the physical sciences learned that they also needed to know about the dynamics of family life in the urban slums, and the effects of ennui on suburban youth.

This first experience with interdisciplinary student task forces was a modest one, both in terms of numbers of students involved and money spent. The results are also modest. Much more needs to be known and done about improving graduate curricula, about applying the technological advances developed in one professional field to the solution of problems in other professional fields, about demonstrating to students who would improve the world that investing in learning is truly economical. The support of student task forces is meant as a small step in the right direction.

MAY 1972