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ABSTRACT

Today's requirements for college admission and levels of performance and their effects on curriculum design and standards, teacher attitudes, and student attitudes are discussed, particularly as they relate to the community college. The open-door policy of the community college, students' attitudes concerning their responsibilities as students and to society, the undisciplined teacher, and the undisciplined behavior of the students are among the problems addressed. (DB)

THE MEASURE OF LEARNING

by

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A NARRATIVE PRESENTATION TO NOVA UNIVERSITY
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The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education has observed that while not everyone has a college degree just yet, nearly everyone of college age expects one these days. There was a time when a certain aura surrounded the person holding a college degree because it was identified as the symbol of attainment, the proof of accomplishment. Perhaps justly or unjustly, the college degree was not intended for everyone who finished high school. Those who entered the doors of institutions of higher learning were expected to comply with established standards of academic achievement, to submit to traditional authority, to accept elevated levels of competition, to prove individual excellence, to fit into a predetermined program, to adapt to standards of rigidity and discipline, and in most instances struggle for academic survival. The individual who mastered the techniques of college performance and accepted its blessings was definitely in the minority. The aura that enveloped him also moved him into positions of responsibility designed to match his performance skills. He was expected to perform better than those who had not been exposed to college training. The institution from which he obtained his degree certified this with pride. He was one of a few who had met the challenge, mastered the test, and had "arrived". He was unique. He was a college man.

Educators are currently complaining that the aura and its blessings are rapidly disappearing as the degree becomes easier and easier to obtain. Quietly, but in

great numbers,colleges and universities across the country are making the road to the diploma easier on their students - or at least on themselves. Requirements for both admission to college and levels of performance thereafter have changed. Not long ago, a foreign language was indispensible. At many schools, language requirements have disappeared altogether. Some Ivy League colleges recently started issuing diplomas in English rather than Latin because few graduates could read their own diplomas.[1] There is now widespread concern that this example is symptomatic of other such deletions in the curriculum which led to the obtaining of the degree. The dependability and usefulness of students graduating from college with a degree in their hands is being called into question by employing segments of our society. Industry, government, and private concerns are dubious about current trends in curriculum design and the standards of performance which certify today's "educated" college graduate.

In an effort to determine if criticism is indeed justified, a great deal of research and documentation has been devoted to the subject of curriculum design and standards for its evaluation. It cannot be disputed that, for better or for worse, there have been drastic changes in both the character of curriculum and the pholosophy which supports its implementation, while the ultimate product - the student himself - is still undergoing evaluation. If criticism is justified at all, it must have a basis in these changes. Many educators fearfully suspect that the old adage,

"Every day in every way, things are getting better and better all the time" is ringing with less and less truth. Several things tend to support these suspicions.

A decline in student enrollment causing a diminished number of students to be distibuted over a wide variety of courses brings into play a well known economic principle, that of supply and demand. Traditionally, colleges have not had to "play the numbers" in a negative sense. That is, they have normally had more students than they had classrooms for and were able to accept only the best candidates for admission. When enrollment drops, as it has in recent years, accountability requires that we ask the question, "Can we afford to pay a teacher to teach only a handful of students?" In an effort to balance the books, a minimum number of students per class is arbitrarily set, and a cut-off figure is established to determine if a given class will be terminated or not. This figure, of course, represents employment or unemployment for the teacher in question. It is well known among elementary and secondary school people that coaches and teachers certified to operate a summer recreation program begin early recruitment from among their regular students to comprise a class for summer employment. Once a class is in progress, teacher requirements and the level of student performance tends to decline under the supply-demand pressure to maintain sufficient numbers to justify continuance of the class. If too many leave the program, future programs are placed in jeopardy. Thus, it becomes essential to please the group, give them what they want, and do it in such a

way that they become good advertising agents for future classes. This temptation exists at higher levels also. Competition for students may have the effect of pandering to the desires at the lower end of academic expectations rather than at the higher end. It may result in compromising, diluting, and the watering down of standards to the point that they become meaningless. Whether this is often done or not is subject to speculation, but one must admit the temptation does exist.

The long arm of the federal government also influences the establishment and maintenance of achievement standards. Consider the plight of an administrator who is required to maintain a specified number of racial minority students in his school in order to receive federal funds for its operation. Consider further the attitude of teachers who are not equipped, but are assigned to teach students with sharp differences in ethnic origins, value systems, and life expectations. Add to this the students' knowledge that their presence (not performance) is the life blood of the program. Now relate these factors. Is not the stage set for some back-scratching and bargaining? If two-thirds of the students in a class of electronics, nursing or other technical areas are federally assisted, one would do well to see that the federal "point of view" is respected and not too many students fail to find satisfaction in the program. That is, satisfaction to the extent that the students get what <u>they</u> decide is beneficial and worthwhile. The burden of learning then shifts to a different foot as the administration and instructional staff

dance to a new tune whistled by students who are backed by the federal dollar. In time, the diploma will certify what the student decides is important, not necessarily what the sponsoring institution believes to be worthwhile goals. This is not to say that federally assisted programs are initiated with this in mind, but it is to say that some programs stray in this direction. To the extent that this condition prevails, there is a regretable lowering of standards.

In some cases courses are imposed upon the members of an instructional staff with little consideration as to whether they are qualified or desire to teach them. This is usually, but not necessarily on the secondary school level. Either by legislative act or administrative dictate, new courses are added to the curriculum which are designed to serve a stipulated purpose. Such courses may be a reaction to public hysteria over some political issue; they may be attempting to fill a demand created by a local fad; they may be the brainchild of recent educational research; or they may be unexplained altogether, but they exist. The philosophy behind such courses is not always evident to the instructor involved, but he is required to teach them as part of his regular teaching assignment. When this occurs, instructors tend to accept responsibility with reluctance and put as little effort as possible into developing a well rounded course of study. Their lack of enthusiasm normally is transferred to the student. Little effort or imagination is required of the student, and even less is delivered. Should there be many such courses in the program of instructio

minimum performance becomes the expected standard for other more demanding courses. While this example is probably not widespread over the nation, in instances where it occurs, it poses a serious threat to the preservation of quality academic performance.

There are instances, especially in small conservative communities, where unconventional but stimulating and worthwhile teaching techniques may be thwarted by individual, but influential members of the community. Departure from standard orthodox procedure which appears to threaten the status quo meets fierce opposition in some localities. Here, change is synonymous with revolution and the destruction of cherished values. Should an innovative teacher attempt to teach in a different way, suggest that established values be questioned, or take an unpopular position on sensitive issues, he is subject to criticism by those close to the students he teaches. The criticism may come in the form of a telephone call, a personal visit, or committee interview which leaves the impression that his service is not truly regarded as a service. If he is clever, he will read between the lines and conclude that his views are in conflict with local standards, and to persist in reflecting them may cost him his job. But worse, should he decide to revise his philosophy and teaching techniques but still fail students, he is once again held in suspect. Only a course of apology, accommodation, and adjusting to suggested revisions assures him security. No one knows how many compromises have been made because of conditions such as these or how many students have emerged from classes which were designed, guided, and controlled by non-enrollees. We can, however, correctly

surmise that it has been done and will probably continue to be done in the future.

There is also no way of knowing how many courses of study have been altered and adjusted downward because of pressure from social and political groups. We only know these groups wield power and influence and will not hesitate to use it when it serves their purpose. Threats of investigatio by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, inquiries from the Veterans Administration, public reprimands from the John Birch Society, and visits by representatives of the Office of Equal Opportunity do little toward enhancing one's teaching career. Failing students frequently have recourse to these organizations. In the day of student rights, teachers have second thoughts about sticking to the letter of the law and refusing to make exceptions to rules. It becomes easier and much safer to find ways for hostile and aggressive students to pass. Teachers approaching retirement and having seen so much change in the educational structure over the years reason that professional ruination late in one's career is a genuine possibility. One is tempted to rationalize that sticking to established standards, especially when so many have already changed, is simply not worth the risk. Too many good teachers have fought the good fight, kept the faith and lost the battle. Many of the rest are tired of fighting and are willing to accept the next best alternative to surrender. They compromise and survive.

In the belief that a democracy requires we should educate as many people as much as possible, tremendous

strides have been taken to push large numbers of students through school. Beginning with pre-school programs designed to prepare children for formal classroom instruction, we have included absolutely everyone. No one will argue that everyone should not be considered at this level, but somewhere along the line there comes a time when not everyone can perform the learning skills required of them. When this is discovered, we employ a variety of techniques to keep them in school. If a child does not read well, cannot calculate arithmetic accurately,or otherwise fails to respond to academic challenges, we often mistakenly conclude that he is gifted in motor skills. Many honest and sincere junior high school English teachers have found comfort in the statement, "If he can't read, he must be good with his hands", so off to the shop class he goes. It is not long before the shop teacher discoveres that not only is he a poor shop student, but he is downright dangerous handling power tools.

No one wants to face thefact that he does not really fit into any program the school has to offer, so we push him up through the grades and out of high school with a diploma that looks pretty much like all others. During this time, we have disguised failure to look like success. It was called social promotion, not working up to capacity, keeping him with his peers and was accompanied with a variety of grading systems designed to confuse the parent, please the student, and protect the teacher. The diploma and what we have done with the student may be more conscience-salving than academic certification. It represents our attempts to be fair, to give him a chance, and to do the right thing. It also tells him that he can perform about as well as other

classmates who have a diploma similar to his. When he applies for a job or enters the open door community college, he does not expect to change his previous pattern of behavior or the standards which earned him his diploma. If met with opposition, he will attempt to bargain with what we have allowed him to believe he has, not what he actually has. In 1972, a high school graduate in California filed suit against the school board for a million dollars in damages because of the worthlessness of his diploma. The fact that his case was accepted is evidence that there is a disparity in occupational expectations and educational certification.

One of the functions of the open door community college is to absorb part of the growing number of students coming from high school in these circumstances. Many students enter community colleges because the open door policy is their only opportunity to attend college. There is no apology for this, but it means that community colleges face a different sort of challenge and must adopt a different philosophy than exists at universities. Mr. Tom Dodamead, Chief Counselor at Polk Community College puts it this way, "In the community college we deal with students who have passed through a twelve or thirteen year educational process which neither encouraged nor rewarded independent effort. These students have succeeded in - or in some cases barely survived - an educational process that has stifled much of their initiative and perhaps even taught them failure instead of success."[2] Most community colleges recognize this fact and take steps to accommodate these students.

Enough students in the lower academic level tend to create a paternal atmosphere which filters into both the classroom and administrative offices. It may eventually affect the basic philosophy of the college itself. Some feel the fundamental reason for changing the name Junior College to Community College has its roots in the need to cater to lower academic, non-transfer students. If a student cannot read - and some cannot - the college is rather obligated to help correct this deficiency if he is to remain in college. If he does not respond to conventional methods of teaching, diagnostic efforts are made to determine how he learns. Professors begin modifying teaching techniques and learn to teach at a lower level. If the student aspires to take courses which are normally more demanding than his past record shows he is capable of passing, prerequsites can be set aside. In some colleges failures are not recorded on the student's transcript at all, so his record shows only that he has passed. It never shows he failed no matter how many times he make take courses and actually fail them. Many colleges provide "sympathetic" counselors sensitive to the "needs" of special students such as minority students, divorcees, older adults and veterans. If a student enters a course and decides within the first few days that he does not want to continue with it, he may drop out or switch to another course without penalty. His record shows none of this. One cannot say that the community college is not making an effort to help those in need. Some people believe it has gone farther than the second mile in this direction and

has allowed mediocrity to become the standard for success; the tail has begun to wag the dog. If this is true, it has been at least partly encouraged by student attitudes toward what they view as college work before they arrive in college.

There is an air of casualness surrounding student attitudes concerning their responsibility as a student. Not many enter the community college with concern as to what is expected of them. Yet, they seem confident of success. They appear to be more concerned with rights and benefits than duties and responsibilities. Although it is not always expressed in words, the impression one gets is, "I paid my fees, so I should pass." This impression is punctuated by the student's complete lack of apprehension and anxiety. Some professors report that student attitudes tend to relegate them to the position of a hired hand, especially when students announce at the beginning of a course that they must have an "A" to graduate and the professor is expected not to disappoint them.

A few students feel that <u>time</u> spent studying for a test should become a tool for measuring test results, regardless to the level of performance on the test itself. Questions asked at the beginning of a course reveal a great deal about student attitudes and intentions. "Do I have to come to class?" "Do I have to buy a book in order to pass this course?" "What are the minimum requirements for the course?" These questions answer more than they ask.

What is the ultimate outcome of this kind of thinking? If allowed to persist, these attitudes are extended deeper into other segments of society. With so many of our people

still under the age of twenty-five, we are a youth oriented society. Success in politics and the marketing world depends upon pleasing the young. They represent too many votes and dollars to ignore. Careers are opened to them at an earlier age and on less strengent qualifications than they were a decade ago. In a profession, they continue to reflect the attitudes with which they grew up. Young television and movie writers prepare scripts and produce pictures designed to perpetuate their own values. The entertainment and teaching message of the cinema world becomes twenty-five year old brain surgeons who perform miracle operations with unconventional but superior techniques, teen age philosophers who pin-point the ills of society and place the blame squarely on the shoulders of their parents, youthful Doctors of Philosophy who abandon organized society and become beach combers or road bums, and victimized, but otherwise wholesome young men who have been driven to the threshold of death through drug addiction by a cruel and uncaring society. These examples and others like them encourage a refusal to participate in solving society's problems, a rejection of society's values and a general retreat from responsibility.

A teacher entering the profession embracing such sentiments tends to believe that there are no absolute values, that the student knows as much as he does, that the most important thing he can do is allow the student in his charge to "do his own thing," and education is what the student wants it to be. He may apologize for his authoritarian position and make exceptional efforts to "identify" with the

student, to become l.i pal. He dresses, speaks and acts as much like a stude as his profession will allow. He usually sees himself as a defender of student rights against an oppressive administration, and he visualizes his role in the classroom as isolated from the broader more inclusive educational process. He works next to and beside other teachers but not with them. He finds it difficult to interact with other people unless they are supporting him in what he wants to do. Policies and procedures that do not directly serve his immediate purpose seem to be irrelevant and oppressive, because he is unable to grasp the demensions of a society operating as a whole. Interrelated and interdependent functions of society escape him. His thought process seems to be limited to a purely individualistic point of view, much like that of a child who cannot understand why parental restrictions are necessary. He tends to take liberties others do not take and sees no reason why he should not take them. His personal values and goals are short sighted and vague. With his degree he fits, yet undisciplined he does not fit. Because of this he is of questionable service to his profession and to those whom he is hired to teach.

Probably the most severe case of undisciplined behavior was recently discovered in the US Army where discipline is needed most. Many inductees into the army were so undisciplined upon entry into service that an abnormally high rate of mental stress cases developed in basic training, not combat. These were men who were mentally deficient in an organic sense. They were simply psychologically unprepared to act as part of a team, to form a unit, to interact and build a composite fighting force. They were unprepared to accept "No" as an

an answer to their personal wishes. The army began to worry about their dependability in meeting emergency situations (war is an emergency) when the height of their concern was centered around beer in the barracks, bed-check, go-go girls in the service club, parking space for new sport cars, and hair spray for stylish long hair. Unwillingness to accept responsibility, desertions in time of combat, and outright refusal to take orders later justified these worries. One can imagine how many lives would be lost if every man in a responsible position saw only his individual comfort at stake and performed accordingly.

Once inroads are made and the pavement laid for a new way of thinking, there is little that can be done to halt its growth unless it defeats itself. Conservatives and defenders of tradition speak with a weak voice if they are small in number. The discipline and order that went into Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is not needed for the popular rock festival of 1973, nor would a symphonic performance draw as impressive an audience in terms of numbers. Today's popular music is analogos of a growing trend toward permissiveness. It is quickly and easily adapted to mass participation with a minimum of effort and relatively free of restraints. It is not long enduring, to be sure, but it serves an immediate short range purpose. What lyrics lack in originality and message, amplifiers make up in volume and repetition. Since it is lacking in enduring musical quality, it must be supported by something else. Tons of electronic gear, miles of wire, pulsating repetition, exotic costumes, defying body gyrations, volume in record sales, and a full spectrum of colored lights are the crutches that support the easily

copied and slightly varied melodies that spring from essentially the same mold. Quality is packaged for mass consumption and may be obtained and experienced on the installment plan.

Let us hope that we are not being so compromising in our efforts to be fair and render service to those who need it that we go overboard. It takes only one generation of badly managed education to do irreparable harm to the society it is designed to serve. The nation can ill afford to have a generation of people who have learned only to consume and not produce, to use and not replace, to criticize and not construct, to command and not to serve. It is not surprising that so many young people are searching for values. Many have never seen values exhibited to the point that they could identify them, let alone reject them. It appears then that the greatest service we can render our young people is to give them dependable standards of achievement and not allow them to enter adulthood wondering whether they are afoot or on horseback. Men do what they are properly prepared to do. If they are prepared for nothing, they will do nothing. Consider the anguish of a generation of people which felt it acted with its best wisdom when another shouts, "Why didn't you tell me the truth?"

FOOTNOTES

1. "A Degree Means Less - Aura's Gone", FTU Library Current Awareness List, Vol 5, No. 12, June 22, 1973, p. 17.

2. Thomas E. Dodamead and Joseph H. Caldwell, "Non-Punitive Grading: Encouraging Academic Exploration", Community and Junior College Journal, March 1973, p. 29.