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ABSTRACT

Issues concerning college attendance are addressed in a discussion between five college students and two representatives of the National Commission on Excellence in Education. The participants' comments consider the positive and negatives aspects of entering college, the value of pre-matriculation orientation, activities during the freshman year, the academic challenge, the difficulty of being a commuter student, the values of a college education, the relationship between the college experience and students' home life, valuable courses/curricula, the use of essays and personal interviews in admission decisions, the need to provide educational opportunities for working adults, and the importance of family support to students during the transition from high school to college. (SW)

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Discussion with Students: June 24, 1982

Participants:

Lei Tung, Graduating Senior, Laboratory School/Univ. of Chicago
Pre-Matriculated Freshman, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Randi Foreman, Freshman, Oakton Community College

Glen Griffiths, 29, Freshman, School for New Learning, DePaul University

Meg Knowles, Freshman, Loyola University

Jill Murray, Freshman, Goodman Theatre/DePaul Univ. Joint Program (CC transfer student)

Commissioner: Jay Sommer
Staff: Clifford Adelman

Sommer: What were the positive and negative aspects of entering college? The shock of being thrown into a new environment can be a beneficial learning experience for some, while others needs special help getting through the initial difficulties.

Knowles: It was a very exciting process, but some kids are very intimidated. There is no question that pre-matriculation orientation is necessary. We had a "welcome week" that provided a good deal of social reinforcement.

Foreman: The Freshman year was probably the best I'll have. One can get involved in student actiyities and governance, and get to know a great many people.

Knowles: You can do that more easily if you are prepared for the academic challenge. I now stay up studying later and more often than I did in high school.

Adelman: Do you manage your time better--to fit in all these activities?

Knowles: You have to learn how to do that. It's much tougher for commuter students.

Murray: I went through two transitions. I started at a commuter school, North Park Community College. I knew what I wanted to do, which was to study drama, and I couldn't get into Goodman. Commuting was hard, and I felt cut off from the kind of group learning I get now at Goodman. I'd learned all the bureaucratic stuff by the second time, though: course requirements, registration, how to get through. . .

Adelman (to Tung): Do you have the same sense of anticipation about going to MIT? How different do you think it's going to be from the Lab School--which is on a University campus, so may be a bit different than other high schools?

Tung: The Lab School has the virtue of being a small place, which means that I got a lot of attention and was allowed some freedom. I took a math course at the University of Chicago, which I think gave me a good idea of what college demands will be like.

Adelman (to Griffiths): Jill /Murray/ said she learned how to master all the bureacratic barriers the second time around, like registration, which can be a traumatizing experience for many freshmen. We used to ask freshmen what they think they bought at registration after they went through the line and paid their fees. What do you think you bought?

Griffiths: Career mobility, future satisfaction on completion of the degree, but most of all the social certification of intelligence, which is what a college degree gives you in the world. I have already had three careers, and have used perhaps 50% of what I learned in high school. What it's taught me is that there is no one academic program that is fully compatible with what you do in life. I fully expect to outgrow my current education in 15 years, and that I will need another education later.

Sommer: All of you have expressed your eagerness and excitement at entering college. Does that eagerness match the reality of what you found? What do you see as the relationship between your college experience and your home life?

Murray: There's a great deal of sadness when you don't make it in the first time. You have hopes and your parents have hopes, and sometimes they don't match or work out.

Griffiths: There is a different kind of paradox here. There is always a fear in change, but simultaneously an eagerness because you realize that this is your one chance. You've got to learn to balance the fear and the eagerness to get an open feeling about entering college.

Knowles: The largest concern for freshmen is reestablishing an identity. One has to re-prove yourself academically. You had a relationship with high school teachers and have to establish a whole new set of relationships with college teachers. A third of the kids at Loyola are pre-med, and they push hard right at the beginning to establish a relationship with a professor so that they can get to the point of doing research with professors. Sub-academic groups, like honors programs for freshmen, provide additional sources for identity, but you don't have to declare a major right away.

Murray: I wonder why people go to college without a clear idea of a major. They ought to know what they're going to do. I knew what I wanted.

Knowles: A lot of them go in order to discover what they want to do. There's nothing wrong with that. And there are others who going to get knowledge for knowledge's own sake.

And about relationships with home: I think that value conflicts are more difficult for resident students than commuters. There is a lot of pressure in dormitories and a lot of kids are confused.

Lei: What I see that's going to be very different is that college courses move at a much faster pace than high school courses, and that you have to study immediately after every class to integrate what you've learned or you're left behind. MIT has an undergraduate research program (UROP) which I look forward to.

Adelman (to Griffiths): You said you had three careers already and that no one course of study could prepare people for that kind of what's becoming a more typical pattern. What learning do you think was necessary for what you do now and what, of that learning, do you think would be helpful to everyone in their college careers?

Griffiths: I'm in international marketing now, and think there are four areas that are necessary: (1) foreign language (I got it in high school and also by living in Peru); (2) exposure to working with numbers (I got that not only in high school but also by taking non-credit college-level courses on my own); (3) visual abilities, learning to observe and see better, which I got from studying the visual arts; and, most importantly (4) interpersonal skills, including persuasion, how to motivate yourself and others, how to be sensitive and listen well. For that one take communication and perhaps psychology.

Murray: How do you teach interpersonal skills? Do you have a separate course?

Griffiths I think it's a function of superior teaching in any course.

Knowles: One of the things that makes the biggest difference between high school and college is that you recognize that these things--like interpersonal skills or ethics--can be taught. The idea is to educate the whole person, not merely the person as if they're only on a career track. Your interaction with your teachers, regardless of the subject, can do that.

Griffiths: The inspiring teacher at any level of education does it. But what bothers me is that the willingness of the Government to subsidize the development of the minds of the society has ebbed, and with that, we're losing a degree of enthusiasm for the future.

Sommer: You know, I've been saying this year that it's un-American to deprive people of education. We ignore the seed of progress. It should be on the top agenda of Government. It's like baking bread: you can't do it without the dough.

Knowles: Yet we have a problem with businessmen who want educated employees but who support all these budget cuts.

Sommer: Why do we accept the fact that people in the arts have to starve? If we took one quarter of the dollars we spend on the trash they show on TV, we could endow the whole arts enterprise in America--one that many of you have found so valuable.

Adelman: When the Commission gets done with talking to people all over the country, and with reading massive amounts of material, it has to write a final report that will contain recommendations, solid recommendations directed toward what we can really change in American education, recommendations that are really practical. What recommendations would you make to the Commission? and what recommendations would you like to see it make?

Knowles: You ought to recommend that as many people as possible take computer courses. I took mine through a community college while I was in high school because the high school couldn't give it. I also think they ought to fix up the tests we get. Compared to what I've had in college, the AP test was too easy.

Lei: The problem with the AP tests (and I took four of them) is that the courses we had were geared to the subject matter of the test, not to real knowledge. The tests in French and American History were perhaps better in that respect:

when you have an oral section of the test, like in French, you can't really study for it; you have to use your knowledge. And when you get an essay question in the history test that is based on different kinds of materials, the real point is to demonstrate your analytical skills. You can't study for that, either.

Sommer: I am increasing convinced that educators don't understand the difference between examinations that test knowledge and examinations with intricacies to them that have nothing to do with knowledge.

Knowles: As far as admissions is concerned, maybe essays and personal interviews would be worth more than the tests we have now.

Foreman: I think kids should try to take a college course while they are in high school. The opportunities are there, and they'd get a better taste of what to expect.

Griffiths: The Commission should recommend expanding the supply of educational opportunities for working adults. College should gear programs to the schedules of adults--more evenings, more Saturdays. The emphasis has to come from the colleges themselves, though. They also should expand programs that grant credit for the actual production of knowledge, for results, not amount of time spent in the classroom.

Murray: Parents' roles are very important to the transition. Good family support is important, and maybe we should have family teaching programs, where both parents and kids learn things together. But the family in America is changing, and that support isn't always there. So kids need good teachers who will spend more time with them and fill in the gaps when the family isn't strong enough.

Sommer: How do you get good teachers to do that? How do you get more of them?

Murray: Pay them enough to support a family, particularly men. Teaching is the dream of a lot of people, but they have to give it up. We can make it a reality.

Lei: But if you do that, you may draw in people who just want the money, and aren't really dedicated.

Sommer: We don't start the training of teachers in the right way. We don't give them any idea of what a precious profession this is.

Knowles: If American society held teachers in the same respect that they are held in other countries, it might be different.

Lei: I disagree: a mutual respect between teachers, students, and parents is necessary.

Knowles: As things are now, though, the student is made to feel inferior. If teachers don't feel respect, they respond by creating a classroom monarchy. It's a result of their lack of a sense of self-worth.

Murray: But that's all a result of how we measure success in America: we distort things so much by paying movie stars and athletes huge salaries, and don't value the people who make the future possible.