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ABSTRACT

The problems experienced by nontraditional college students and the responses by colleges and universities are considered. The new students on campuses are adults, students from lower socioeconomic levels, ethnic minorities, and women. Since many new students tend to have academic difficulties, colleges have offered remedial classes in each subject area. Colleges can be expected to focus increased attention on the problems of the new student population as the traditional student population continues to decline. If remedial programs are to be successful, the student with weak skills must be identified early, preferably at admission or orientation time. The student will need intensive counseling support to develop a more positive and self-confident approach to learning. The teacher should select the remedial program assignment, rather than being assigned to it. The teacher should have the responsibility to decide what is to be learned and the teaching methods. Individualization of programs and Bloom's concept of mastery learning may be helpful approaches. Students should know learning goals and work on small, sequential and structured learning units that are self-paced. Constant feedback and evaluation are important. (SW)

A LAMP BESIDE THE ACADEMIC DOOR

A LOOK AT THE NEW STUDENT AND HIS NEEDS

Deborah E. Arfken

Who Is the New Student?

Once upon a time in academic land all students were highly principled, highly motivated, high-achieving young men and women between eighteen to twenty-two in age, seeking intellectual enlightment.

These students have disappeared; no one is sure just what happened to them. In their places are the New Students, a heterogeneous group comprised of all learners who were previously underrepresented in higher education: adults, students from lower socioeconomic levels, ethnic minorities, and women.[1] Despite their vast differences, they do share one salient characteristic: these students all have difficulty with academic work.

In the past, educators have identified New Students in ethnic terms. However, as K. Patricia Cross emphasizes in her detailed study, Beyond the Open Door, learning problems are not color bound. In fact, two-thirds of the community colleges surveyed in 1971 stated that fewer than one-fourth of their students in remedial situations were of ethnic minorities.[2]

Specifically, the New Student--or the remedial, marginal, developmental, high risk, slow learner, low-achieving, educationally handicapped, disprivileged, disadvantaged, or non-traditional student or whatever label may currently be in vogue--has an erratic school record and unimpressive standardized test scores. Usually, he scores

in the lowest third. Because he is not confident of his academic abilities, he will avoid risk situations. He prefers to learn what others have said rather than to engage in his own intellectual questioning. Obviously, he does not enjoy abstract ideas, preferring instead to learn things that are tangible and useful. This pragmatic nature attracts him to activities, such as crafts and mechanics, not ordinarily stressed in schools and ultimately to a vocational career.[3]

With such a background, why does the New Student come to higher education? He comes because he has been swept into college by a society with rising educational aspirations. He wants a better job and life than his blue-collar father, and society has assured him that a college or university degree will provide that success. He comes also because admissions officers have actively recruited him.

What Are His Problems?

Once on campus, the New Student becomes an academic problem and generates controversy between administration and faculty. The student does not perform traditional educational tasks, particularly reading and writing, with competency. Indeed, his achievement may only reach low junior high school level. He is the product of a national school system that has seen mean composite scores on ACT tests plummet two standard scores from 1964 to 1976.[4] About the only skill this student has, but one he excels in, is knowing how to avoid failure. He will knowingly avoid learning situations where he must expose himself to risk, preferring the security of doing an exercise over and over, even when he has mastered it. As John Holt so astutely pointed out in

How Children Fail, incompetence does have advantages. This student has learned that not only does society reduce its expectations for him, but so does he for himself. If one deliberately sets out to fail, then he will not be disappointed.

How Has Higher Education Reacted to Him?

To understand the extent of the problem which inextricably binds the New Student and higher education, it is necessary to remember that in the early years of academic history most students came from homes of wealthy aristocrats. A college education was reserved, of course, for the brightest and especially for the wealthiest. As the population of the country swelled with influxes of immigrants, the aristocratic idea was challenged by those who maintained a college education should be an earned right rather than a birthright. These advocates of meritocracy felt the criteria for admission should be based on academic ability and willingness to study hard. While the new meritocracy led to a democratization of higher education, ironically its academic admissions tests also set up new barriers.

By the early 1970's there was growing evidence that revolt was occurring once again as New Students demanded to enter the doors of higher education without the barriers of either the aristocratic or meritocratic systems. Encouraged by the position of the 1970 Task Force on Higher Education, the "relevancy" theme of American society, and expanding financial aid, New Students moved en masse through the open doors of education. By 1978 over seventy per cent of the four-year colleges and universities admitted to an open door admissions and recruitment policy.[5]

Immediately, the controversy flared. Faculty who had delighted in teaching those highly selected students with high test scores and high motivation went into deep shock. Professors could not understand the New Student's lack of interest and motivation, much less the appalling display of inferior skills. They dreaded the demeaning task of trying to teach this student who did not learn well by listening and reading and who definitely did not fit into a traditional classroom teaching situation. As a result, a difficult circumstance was often compounded and the New Student subjected to "deliberate professional neglect." He became an academic "afterthought."[6] In addition to the severe educational problems these students exhibited, community colleges found their attrition rate moving from 34.4 per cent to 40.1 per cent, and senior colleges found theirs accelerating from 13.6 per cent to 29.6 per cent. The overall rate had moved from 19.9 per cent to 35.8 per cent.[7]

Initially, educators and administrators in four year institutions subscribed to the philosophies of "if the door can open then it can also revolve shut" and "equal educational opportunity is fine as long as it does not clash with our values."

By the mid 1970's, however, even the most seclusive institutions had come to realize that the New Student was here to stay. In fact, the New Student would have to be encouraged, even courted, to stay in the ensuing decades of decline.

But how could the New Student be taught? Remedial classes in each subject area were the instant answer. Faculty saw these courses

as buffer zones, holding New Students until they could pass muster and assume their identity as traditional students. Here the student, already demoralized by his initial difficulties in college and his less than persistent nature, was given a program which many faculty scorned as being watered down, a program which they felt gave away grades and credit for less than college work. Some colleges even saw remedial programs as custodial; such programs were to keep students out of the labor market, out of trouble and off the streets.

Later evaluations of these quick-solution courses were damning. Rosen, Brunner and Fowler in their monograph saw these students as "branded, officially or by implication" as second-class citizens of their college. A former remedial student, Jerome Ben Rosen, painfully recollects: "So there it was, a whole life fragmented by the gnawing fear of the uneducable. I was uneducable in math and therefore worthless in every other aspect of life. I felt this as deeply as the foretaste of death."[8] But most depressing of all was John E Roueche's study in 1968, the first national study of remedial education programs in American community colleges, which documented the widespread failure of remedial programs to be of any real assistance to their students.

How Can Higher Education Meet His Needs?

As higher education moves into the next three decades of declining student population, the issue of the New Student will receive sharp attention, for it is the New Student who will keep the institution alive. Thus we must face the jarring question that K. Patricia Cross

poses in Beyond the Open Door: Has higher education faced up to the fact that equality of educational opportunity requires more than guarantees of equal access to post-secondary education?[9] If there is no answer provided, then higher education delivers these students a double whammy: it keeps the academically untalented student in a situation where he does not do well and learns no marketable skills and then sends him out to the workforce, doomed to low entry-level jobs.

As administrators and faculty make their plans for this student, they must first dispel what the media has labelled "mounting alarm." Remedial education is nothing new. Actually, higher education has always had academically weak and poorly prepared students. Wellesley College, for example, offered a "remediation course for academic deficiency" in 1894 and thus claims distinction for being the first in the field. In the 1940's study skills and remedial reading courses were offered at numerous colleges and universities, including Stanford and Harvard. It was only during the 1950's and 1960's that students with learning problems were denied admission to the more prestigious four year institutions. The difference now is that the problem is so pervasive that it represents all of academic society. The decline of scores on the College Entrance Examination Board, American College Testing program, and the National Assessment of Educational Programs witnesses the fact. Thus we find remedial programs necessary in even the most selective institutions. The following facts drawn from Roueche's 1976 survey show the dramatic increase in such services:

-- 86% of all colleges and universities provide special services for the academically disadvantaged. This is true for 95% of the community colleges and 77% of the senior colleges.

-- 83% of the community colleges and 68% of the senior colleges provide diagnostic services.

-- 61% of the senior colleges provide learning assistance centers.[10]

Maxwell's Improving Student Learning Skills supports these figures and states that there are specifically 1,848 learning center components in 1,433 independent colleges and universities in North America.[11] This number doubled between 1974 and 1977, with four-year institutions showing the greatest increase.

It is crucial then for the institution, the president, dean, trustees and faculty to recognize the need for a comprehensive remedial learning program, for it demands institutional priority and dollar commitments.

While there are many facets of a successful program, studies reveal that those organized by department or division, those offering grades and credit, and those providing peer tutoring are the most successful.[12]

When it comes down to essentials, however, the keys to a sound program according to Roueche, Maxwell, and Cross--the acknowledged experts in this field--are found in the identification of the student, the selection of the teacher, and the teaching methods.

If the program is to be successful, the student with weak skills must be identified early, preferably at admission or orientation time.

To facilitate this process, Maxwell provides suggestions for questionnaires and placements tests in her handbook. The student will need intensive counseling support while his fear-of-failure pattern is replaced with a more positive self-confident approach to learning. During this time, he should be told frankly just how the university proposes to help him and how successful the program has been in retaining and graduating students. The student should also know from the onset that the university cannot perform miracles in a semester or two; he should know how vital his own active participation is.

In this learning environment, teachers are the master key. As Mina Shaughnessy said in her remarkable book, Errors and Expectations, "Good teachers make good programs." The teacher should select this program assignment; he should not be assigned to it. It is then his responsibility to decide what is to be learned and how it is to be taught, to get involved with the students, and to communicate his expectations by classroom behavior.

Kenneth Bruffee, professor of English at Brooklyn College, director of Freshman English in 1970, and an early volunteer in this program, exemplifies the special qualities this kind of teacher needs. To learn "the feelings of anxiety, embarrassment, and dumb incapacity" that New Students have, he and other colleagues signed up for courses outside their areas of specialization. In a recent article, he recounts "the fear of being exposed by making mistakes, the terror in taking an exam, the chagrin of being graded." Having experienced this, he finds he is no longer shocked by the problems of teaching the New Student but rather exhilarated by the "new intellectual frontier."[13]

In an effort to break the deadlock of the traditional methods, the teacher implements new teaching strategies involving individualization of programs and Bloom's concept of mastery learning. Instead of teaching from the student's weaknesses, he teaches towards the student's strengths, thus always emphasizing and reinforcing the positive. Learning becomes active when the student knows his goals; works on small, sequential and carefully structured learning units; proceeds at his own pace; and receives constant feedback and evaluation.

Using an individualized approach and self-pacing, given sufficient time and appropriate help, Benjamin Bloom claims that it is possible for ninety-five per cent of the students to master learning and thus break the failure syndrome.

Systematic evaluations of the learning program are important. Roueche's latest research advises that progress can be measured by charting the student's GPA at selected intervals in his collegiate course; by measuring his persistence in completing subsequent semesters; and by evaluating his attitude toward counseling, instruction, and the total developmental program. In a comprehensive study, Roueche found that "remedial students made significantly higher grades than did comparable students in non-remedial programs." Specifically, he found that these students earned a mean GPA of 2.66, almost three-fourths of a gradepoint higher than the 1.96 mean GPA earned by high-risk students in non-remedial programs.[14]

Sobering Conclusions

Although the academic nature of the student body has been changing rapidly in the past decade and will continue to do so even more by the end of this century and although these decades will "unleash grave learning problems," higher education will not only survive but will be better for the experience.[15]

As remedial education becomes a major academic enterprise, faculty and administration must beware the misplaced enthusiasm that higher education can be all things to all people. Yes, the presence of these New Students should cause the academic community to rethink old values and learn to accept students for what they are and for where they come from. But, above all, the institution must make a real, not just a professed, commitment to all students it admits. It must probe for the motives behind its programs. To do so, Dexter suggests we ask the following germane questions. Do the programs emanate from a clear and thorough understanding of the needs of the students? Do they invite affective as well as cognitive growth? Are the fundamental philosophies which support the available programs flexible enough to accommodate experimentation and change?[16] All educators must acknowledge the necessity for continually updating the instructional and administrative policies. By developing appropriate learning programs, the institution will achieve a chain effect of benefits. It will crack a subtle tracking system, eliminate discrimination along racial or class lines, and create respect for minority cultures and life experiences. In turn, it will successfully integrate the New Student into higher education.

Finally, it will facilitate institutional renewal and survival at a time when higher education needs it most. The institution will light a lamp beside the academic door. When in years to come educators look back, one hopes that they in higher education will echo Charles Dicken's description of another troubled era:

> It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way-in short, the period was so like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.[17]

Endnotes

[1]K. Patricia Cross, Accent on Learning (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1976), p. 4.

[2]Cross, pp. 12-13.

[3]K. Patricia Cross, Beyond the Open Door (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1971), p. 62.

[4]Richard Ferguson, "Trends in Academic Performance of High School and College Students," Journal of College Student Personnel, 61 (Winter 1980), p. 508.

[5]John E. Roueche, "Let's Get Serious About the High Risk Student," Community and Junior College Journal, 49, No. 1 (Sept. 1978), p. 28.

[6]John E. Roueche and R. Wade Kirk, Catching Up: Remedial Education (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1973), p. 4.

[7]David Rosen, Seth Brunner and Steve Fowler, Open Admissions (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, n.d.), p. 162.

[8]Jerome Ben Rosen, "Recollections of a High School Dropout," Antiachievement (Los Angeles: Western Psychological Services, 1970), p. 18.

[9]Cross, Beyond, p. 156.

[10]John E. Roueche, Overcoming Learning Problems (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1978), pp. 19-30.

[11]Martha Maxwell, Improving Student Learning Skills (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1979), p. 104.

[12]Maxwell, p. 60.

[13]Kenneth D. Bruffee, "A New Intellectual Frontier," Journal of Developmental and Remedial Education, 2, No. 1 (Fall 1978), p. 10.

[14]Roueche, and Kirk, Catching Up, p. 53.

[15]Fred Stanley, "Closing Address," SCETC Convention, Birmingham, 23 Feb. 1980.

[16]R.P. Dexter, "A Quest for Fulfillment," Teaching English in the Two Year College, 5, No. 1 (Fall 1978), p. 18.

[17]Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities (New York: Washington Square Press, rpt. 1966), p. 3.

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