

The new student learner

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In the history of higher education, there have been three major philosophies about who should go to college. When the country was young, most college students came from the homes of wealthy "aristocrats". Students who attended private high-tuition colleges like Harvard, Yale, Princeton had money and family social status. Some also had academic interests and abilities; others did not. Basic to the aristocratic philosophy of college admissions was the premise that the young people who should go to college were those who could afford it and who needed it for their station in life. It was assumed that the poor, minorities, and women would not follow life patterns that made use of a college education, although a number of finishing colleges for women had as their purpose the training of young ladies to take their place in their aristocracy.

The revolt against aristocratic philosophies of college admissions was led by those who maintained that a college education is an earned right, not a birthright. Advocates of the meritocracy felt that criteria for college admission should be based upon scholastic ability and the willingness to study hard—in short, upon academic merit. In practice, meritocratic principles were applied by means of rather narrow criteria of grades and tests scores to define

merit and to select the "most promising" young people to attend college. Philosophically, the meritocracy reached its peak in the 1950's.¹

The rise of the meritocracy was generally regarded as a move that led to the democratization of higher education, the breaking down of barriers imposed by the aristocracy. However, advocates of the meritocracy were erecting their own barriers. Academic-aptitude tests served both to destroy the old barriers and to erect new ones upon college admission.

In the early 1970's once again there is pressure to democratize higher education by bringing it within reach of a broader segment of the population. There are demands for new answers to the old question of what proportion of the population the colleges should serve.²

Changes in Society

With the passage of the decades, the American creed of educating people for the good life has become more meaningful. It is the distinctive feature of the American philosophy. Educator's aim is to open the door to the good life to everyone, and they have been discovering that the portion of the population that can profit by this type of study on the college level is much larger than had earlier been assumed.³

In the future the student body of higher education will not be a selected group of high school products but the entire adult population. Higher education will not be concentrated in a few years immediately following high school, but will be spread out for one's lifetime as an occasional part-time activity. Young persons

1. K. Patricia Cross, *Beyond the Open Door* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers, 1972), p. 2.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

3. Algo D. Henderson and Jean G. Henderson, *Higher Education in America* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers, 1974), p. 8.

will not devote full time to higher education on leaving high school because they can learn more by getting experience in other kinds of social institutions.

People in the future must learn throughout their lives because society and careers will be changing more rapidly. People will continue to learn throughout their lives because they themselves will change. People must continue to change because society will become even more complex.⁴

The lifelong learning undertaken by the great mass of the population will be different from what is learned on the typical campus today. Each person will decide for himself what interests he wishes to pursue, what personal weaknesses he wishes to correct, what talents he wishes to develop, what competencies seem attractive to him.

Learning will change radically and increase as it is freed from credentials, tradition, prerequisites, age restrictions, time restrictions, cost restrictions, and psychological restrictions.⁵

Students of today are sensitive to human relations problems, but they are not always able to cope with them. One way to help prepare students for this effort is to give them experience in the world they live. Educative experience will give them a larger understanding of human needs and aspirations, will increase their factual knowledge and their ability to observe facts, will demonstrate to them the importance of checking assumptions through practical observations and trial and error, and will motivate them for constructive work in society.⁶

A liberating education is an exploring education. The student seeks wisdom wherever wisdom can be found. The student searches for knowledge because he realizes that the whole truth has not yet been discovered.

4. Alexander M. Mood, *The future of Higher Education* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1973), p. 58.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

6. A.D. Henderson and J.G. Henderson, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

In this approach to learning, how does the student discover the values by which he will live and work? He must make choices in determining his future courses of action, and these choices must be based on what he believes are fundamental values. These values are most reliably found through analyzing human experiences. Experience also aids in showing when actions are good or bad, social or antisocial.⁷

University and the Outland Toward new Students

Academic problems in college have changed during recent years. Although there have always been students who flunked out, sometimes the causes were not so much academic ability as lack of motivation. Certainly there were some students who needed remedial work and others who had various problems that blocked their progress. Students at one institution might have very different intellectual abilities than those at another, but all had similar school backgrounds in one respect. That was, they were all high school graduates who have been, to a greater or lesser extent, successful in their academic pursuits.

The new student in higher education today is one who has never been effectual in the traditional secondary school curriculum. Some have received inferior education in inferior schools. Others have not been successful because of low ability or low motivation or, more often, both. Many of these new college students come from environments where neither their families nor their peers considered academic achievement a goal. New students are those scoring in the lowest third among the national samples of high school students on traditional tests of academic ability. They are students that on previous generations would not have considered entering college.⁸ The open door of the community junior college has given them hope that they can pursue post-secondary

7. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

8. K. Patricia Cross, *New Students and New Needs in Higher Education* (Berkeley: Center for Research and Development in Higher Education, University of California, 1972), p. 39.

education, and through it receive better jobs and a better life.

Beginning in the seventies, men in the lower ability category in high school showed a higher increase in college attendance. This group will probably increase the colleges need to be prepared for students who have never done well on traditional academic studies and who have consistently been assigned the lowest academic ranking. The colleges must meet their new students with workable and who have consistently been assigned the lowest academic ranking. The colleges must meet their new students with workable programs of study different from the traditional programs in traditional colleges.⁹

In addition, new students must be helped to change the image they have of themselves as failure prone students. Programs must be provided that enable them to catch up and that give attention to reorienting their approach to learning. New students need to have repeated opportunities to encounter successful classroom experiences that rebundle their desire to learn.

New students who progress successfully can hopefully assume responsibility for their own learning. Beyond this, it is important that community college educators develop relevant programs around the interest and skill potentials of new students.

Not successful in required traditional schoolwork, the new student knows failure as an ever-present concomitant of school attendance. For this reason, part of secondary education must be in different kinds of education, so that all students can perform well in some subjects. New students do well working with people and working with things. These are the fields where labor shortages exist. It is up to educators to devise programs based on subject matter in these areas, so that this third of the college population can prepare successfully for a satisfying vocational and avocational life.¹⁰

The egalitarian era is rapidly approaching. Although the major concern of education at the present time is with access to higher education, low academic ability is keeping more students from con-

9. *Ibid.*, p. 152.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 154.

tinuing their education that is the barrier of lack of financial resources. Traditional college programs are not prepared to handle the learning needs of the new students to higher education.

The pressures are strong for an egalitarian philosophy of access to postsecondary education. Egalitarianism maintain that anyone who wants to pursue further education should be helped to do so, regardless of economic resources and regardless of past academic achievement. Adoption of egalitarian practices would in effect abolish the effectiveness of present major predictors of college entrance.¹¹

For years American higher education has prided itself on its diversity, claiming to have a wide variety of postsecondary educational programs available to students with heterogeneous backgrounds, abilities, and interests. Much of the so-called diversity, however, has been more imaginary than real. For too long many students have *not* had meaningful choices available to them. As stated in the report of the College Entrance Examination Board's Commission on Tests:

"People are...diverse, more so than colleges have yet learned to take into account in their procedures, their programs, or their instruction. Colleges must change in this respect if everyone is to go to college."¹²

Colleges and universities should change their educational patterns due to the fact that the needs and opportunities of society are changing. Education is knowledge as well as process. There are pathways to knowledge other than the traditionally accepted four years of credit accumulation pursued by young people between the ages of 17 and 23 who devote full time to formal classroom study. The challenge of higher education today is that of providing increased options and new educational opportunities to millions of people. The development of new options in

11. K. Patricia Cross, *Beyond the Open Door*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

12. S.B. Gould, K.P. Cross, Ed., *Explorations in Non-Traditional Study* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers, 1972), 37.

learning requires careful examination of the concepts and criticism of traditional education as well as an analysis of the meaning, potential, and limitations of non-traditional alternatives.¹³

Three characteristics of traditional education pose barriers to the new students. First, the notion that learning requires physical presence in the classroom restricts access to those in geographical remote areas and those who are temporarily or permanently confined. Second, the concept that it is the accumulation of credit hours that fulfills degree requirements handicaps those whose frequent moves interfere with the accumulation of degree credits. Finally, the idea that education is the learner's major activity and that it takes place between 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on working days creates scheduling problems for vast numbers of potential part-time learners.¹⁴

Removal of these barriers is one way to improve access; however, people must be aware that opportunities exist providing them with adequate information.

What reasons do people have for wanting further education? The reasons people give for pursuing formal education vary with age, sex socioeconomic status, past educational achievement, and other variables that change as personal and social conditions change. Threats to the environment will propel some persons to seek new learning. The potential for new career opportunities will attract groups such as ethnic minorities, women whose education has failed to make much difference in the past. Rising educational requirements are facing employees in business and in government. Some employees seek educational credential to compete with younger, better-educated employees; some need new learning to handle the increasing complexity of their jobs, some need certification to meet newly legislated educational requirements.

The new students will be vocationally oriented, and although they may value autonomy and the life styles of the youth culture nearly as much as current students do, the main goals of most of them will be upward social mobility and good job.¹⁵

13. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

15. American Council on Education, *Higher Education for Everybody* (Washington, D.C. 1973), p. 110.

To meet the needs of the many, the educational programs have been diversified and now comprise many and varied fields of interest with curricula of varying lengths. When large numbers of youth from all socioeconomic levels enter college, the number with intellectual ability sufficient to succeed in the higher levels of education is considerably enlarged.

Many persons of lesser intellectual abilities, but with other talents and diversified interests attend college. This raises the questions about the nature and quality of the programs to be offered. If educators emphasize quantity and legislators emphasize low unit costs, what would be promoted is mass education rather than education of the masses. Extension of educational opportunity and the diversification of programs need not and should not mean a lowering of the quality of the programs or of student achievement. Competence in occupations is needed and in civic affairs, and a continuously appreciation for and skill in living the good life.¹⁶

Almost everyone agrees that there is an urgent need for educational reform; as yet, however, everyone does not agree on the direction that the reformation should take. The main arguments concern the questions of what we shall teach and how we shall teach it. The question of whom we shall teach in postsecondary programs has been answered; and the nation is moving, albeit awkwardly, to implement egalitarianism in the 1970's.¹⁷

Although the role of constant evaluation and feedback in learning is hard to overemphasize, students know when they have done their best. The teacher who accepts poor performance, basically because he or she does not think the student can do better, or thinks that because of past injustices the student should not have to do better, is doing a grave disservice to new students. In the final analysis, the teacher who cares must have enough teaching skill and enough confidence in the student to create the environment and situations that require student's best efforts. Teachers should develop learning projects for use in reorientation-to-learning classes. In most cases, the learning models can do double

16. A.D. Henderson and J.G. Henderson, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

17. K.P. Cross, *Beyond the Open Door, op. cit.*, p. 171.

duty by serving both the remedial and reorientation—the cognitive and affective—functions that are necessary to overcome the learning handicaps of new students.¹⁸

It is especially important that the learning projects be models of good learning. Seven conditions required for effective learning that may be useful are: (1) The student must have a clear idea of what he is trying to learn. He needs concrete examples of persons doing what he is expected to learn in order to guide his own efforts. (2) The motivation of the student must be strong enough to impel him to an initial attempt and then to continue the practice. (3) Students must be helped to focus their efforts on the significant features of the behavior they are seeking to master. (4) There must be an ample opportunity for practice in appropriate situations that are meaningful to the student. (5) The student must be provided with feedback on his performance. (6) There must be reward system such that students derive satisfaction from improving their performance. (7) The sequential organization of learning experiences for learning complex and difficult things.¹⁹

New devices and techniques should be perfected to measure the outcomes of many types of non-traditional study and to assess the educative effect of work experience and community service.

Many people believe that present systems of certificates, diplomas and degrees are inadequate or inappropriate to meet current needs. The Supreme Court of the United States had held that employers cannot enforce educational requirements or test results as a condition of employment unless they are specifically related to the work required of a job applicant.²⁰

Generally speaking, schools have done better job of educating youth for continuing the school system that they have of preparing them to lead useful and productive lives. As they evaluate their educational experiences, students seem to recognize the centrality given to academic preparation for further schooling.

Although new students are not as likely as traditional students

18. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

20. Commission on Traditional Study, *Diversity by Design* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers, 1971), p. 126.

to perceive the schools as directly relevant to their interests, they seem to harbor no resentment against the most visible representatives of the system—the faculty.

Students in general would like college to be a pleasant experience where people are friendly and helpful, a place where there are many activities, and students are encouraged to take part. The professors go out their way to make sure that students understand the classwork, and everyone is friendly on the campus.²¹ The faculty should not be rigidly set in traditional way of work. They should be creative, willing to learn any new techniques required, and sufficiently flexible to make changes.

Faculty understandings and commitments must be reoriented and redirected, particularly through in-service development, so that knowledge and use of non-traditional forms and materials will increase.²²

Much non traditional study involves a different and more personal relationship between faculty member and student, always highly prized but now even more valued because of the increasing importance of guidance and counseling in helping the individual more toward his own particular educational goals.²³

The survey of needs and the definition of objectives are essential in planning innovations in curriculum or in courses. Innovation in program is based upon objectivity in planning and evaluation.

When students fully understand and accept the objectives of a course or a curriculum, they are much better motivated to learn. And participation in the planning is likely to result in a higher degree of acceptance of a course by the students. It is necessary for the instructor to do the preliminary planning; if so, students' feedback can be used as basis for modification and redesign for the next occasion.²⁴

The colleges and universities have tended to be defensive about

21. K.P. Cross, *Beyond the Open Door*, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

22. Commission on Non-Traditional Study, *op. cit.*, p. xviii.

23. K.P. Cross, *Beyond the Open Door*, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

24. Algo D. Henderson, *The Innovative Spirit* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers, 1970), p. 180.

their programs and policies rather than open to ideas for change. The times require change. The solutions to problems must be found in action, even if it involves departures from tradition.

Conclusion

Institutions are being pressured to respond to the needs of students of varying ages, abilities, and interests and to provide services for the disadvantaged segments of the population. Students are demanding action on problems relating to their civil liberties and to the desing of the educational program.

In part the youth movement is a reaction against the materialism that has come to dominate our society. The drift toward materialistic values is viewed as evidence of the need for change in higher education since, traditionally, the aim of higher education has been to cultivate the mind and the spirit.

Every college and university must begin to think what kind of society it is easier to see emerge over the years. It must determine what place it has in the building of such society.

The institutions of learning must do more than change the curricula or allow students and faculty to create their own new programs. They must get together until a new concept of the university emerges, one which will better fit today's needs but will have its major thrust toward tomorrow's.

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