

Education -- kindergarten through college -- is currently undergoing a period of introspection, scrutiny, and, in some cases, well-deserved self-flagellation over what has widely been heralded as a failure on our part of producing students with the basic educational competencies. The recent report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education is just one in a series of efforts by civic educational and political leaders to call attention and seek redress to what is being described as a general failure of one or most fundamental social institutions.

While it is my opinion that the "doomsayers" have exaggerated and overstated the magnitude of this dilemma, we are collectively embarrassed by case studies of high school graduates with elementary school skills and of college graduates struggling to demonstrate effective mastery of the most simple intellectual and educational competencies. The declining academic performance at all levels suggests to some that the Academy is in greater need of remediation than the students we serve. As to the Commission's Report, I strongly suggest that you read Morris Keeton's commentary on this subject contained in the June, 1983 edition of the CAEL News, and Current Issues in Higher Education, 82-83, #1 by AAHE entitled "Underprepared Learners."

The common theme dominating most of the conferences and scholarly presentations across the nation is heralding a national rally in support of quality within education at all levels. Make no mistake about it, I support and I am committed to the concept of quality in higher education. The aspiration for excellence is a fundamental principle and correctly-held value which appropriately guides all that we ought do. I am, however, extremely ambivalent and troubled by the form of our reform and have begun to seriously question whether the paths that many of us are pursuing will, in fact, achieve the stated outcomes and objectives. I am coming to believe that for many academicians the pursuit of quality is, in fact, a pursuit of prestige. I am concerned that what is often lost in the formulation of educational policy is that quality assumes validity and that prestige and elitism can be promulgated and achieved in the absence or at the expense of either validity or quality.

Witness the recent actions of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) wherein this body adopted exclusionary eligibility requirements based on the arbitrary one-dimensional misuse of standardized tests. Make no mistake, I support the notion that student athletes are first students, and I do not condone the exploitation of these young men and women for purposes that contradict the basic values of the Academy. I do, however, object to educators who ought to know better adopting a policy so significant in its implications, yet so poorly supported by any significant data that would

suggest the kind of unitary relationship between a test score and the ability to achieve in higher education that this practice implies.

I was pleased and delighted to learn of the enlightened position taken by President Anrig of the Educational Testing Service in opposing NCAA's action. Dr. Anrig's objection is the same as mine. Standards are a means to an end; they are not ends unto themselves. A standard is only appropriate to the extent that it has validity in measuring the stated outcome. I fear that the support of standards has given this amorphous conglomeration of educational practices a life of its own independent of any relationship to its legitimate, real intent, i.e., the assurance of quality. The NCAA has now created a national commission to look into the issue as to whether the educational assumptions already operationalized were, in fact, valid.

No responsible business or industry would implement a major policy decision of this sort and then do the test research as a post-mortem to implementing the policy decision. None of us would allow a student to get a passing grade from any of us if presented with a research paper suggesting this inverted approach to problem-solving.

I had the good fortune of being able to attend two very fine universities in completing my undergraduate work -- the University of Illinois at Champaign for five semesters and Illinois State University for three semesters, where I received my baccalaureate degree. Without question, the University of

Illinois enjoyed the higher stature in institutional prestige in the state and region, a reputation that was a function of its excellent graduate programs, research, and other scholarly achievements of its faculty. It was also well-known that the University of Illinois was an extremely rigorous institution and experienced one of the highest academic attrition rates for undergraduates in the state. It also had one of the highest student suicide rates in the area. Illinois State University, on the other hand, had a much higher success rate of students entering who went on to achieve their baccalaureate degrees from that institution.

While I readily admit that it is probably unscientific to make broad generalizations from one's personal experiences, it is, however, my opinion that the quality of undergraduate teaching I experienced at Illinois State was superior to that of the University of Illinois. I vividly recall a cartoon on the front page of the Daily Illini, the student newspaper, which showed a distraught student holding his grade report on the ledge of the campus building preparing to jump. The cartoon showed counselors trying to talk the student off the ledge with a caption which read, "Don't jump! You can always go to Southern!" "Southern" referred to Southern Illinois University, another institution which also enjoyed a good reputation for the quality of its undergraduate teaching and student-centered educational policies.

During my freshman year at the University of Illinois, I was enrolled in the Introductory Psychology course along with

2,210 of my fellow students. I watched the lecture which was video-taped on television in an auditorium with 400 of my student colleagues. I remember a statement made by the professor wherein he indicated that, "Learning is most effective when teaching considers the individual background and previous learning environment of the student." We didn't hear the rest of the instructor's remarks, for they were drowned out in the laughter of the student audience. At the University of Illinois in the College of Arts & Sciences at least, the principal teaching method was for the faculty to give large group lectures and for graduate students to "teach" discussion sessions and laboratories. At Illinois State University, the faculty also taught the lab and smaller group class meetings. It is clearly not my intention to deprecate the University of Illinois. It was, and is, a great university, and I am proud of my past affiliation with it.

However, where is the quality in this dichotomy? Is it with those universities that focus their attention on the teaching of undergraduates, or is it at the institution that concentrates its resources and reputation in its graduate programs in research? All of the institutions mentioned had selected admissions for students who scored well on standardized tests and possessed excellent high school grades. Is the presumption of quality with the institution that had the higher failure rate with its talented students or with those institutions that had the higher success rate in the training of those who entered its halls? I can tell you clearly which



institution enjoyed the higher prestige, but my assessment of the relative higher qualitative judgments for the academic experience of undergraduates would probably be located at one of the other institutions.

Later, as a member of the faculty and Administration, one of my responsibilities at Illinois State University was to direct a program for talented students with high academic potential who may not have demonstrated this potential through traditional means. The program was named, oddly enough, "The High Potential Students Program." Students were selected for admission to the University, and participation in this program, pursuant to personal interviews, were factors such as motivation, self-concept, strength, teacher and counselor recommendations, and other factors which were given much greater weight than performance or test scores and high school grades. There were no special classes for those students, but some intensive remediation was provided for those students who had deficiencies in basic school skills. The retention rate, graduation rate, and college gradepoint average for this group was higher than that of the general University student body. However, on the average, their ACT test scores were significantly lower than other students.

Some argued, initially, that the presence of these students with lower test scores compromised the University standards. Those arguments disappeared, however, in the face of the students' superior achievement. Where, then, is the judgment on quality? I suggest that, because of the

achievement rate of these students, we enhanced the quality of the student body and did not lower it. We did not lower admission standards; we used different admission standards and with superior results -- unless, of course, one equates the test scores of students as synonymous with the quality of students.

There must be a vigilance among those of us who would hold the Academy under the same questioning scrutiny that the Academy holds the rest of society to insure that the legitimate pursuit of quality does not become perverted into a vehicle for indicting creative innovations that would do it better by doing it differently. We can restore the elitism of the Academy, we can inflate the rigorousness of the Academy, and we can enhance the prestige of the Academy. We can do all of this at the expense of the quality of the Academy. I do not object to standards that are rigorous and demanding; in fact, I applaud them if those standards and practices are well-conceived to achieve real quality. However, the standards must be valid -- not speculative -- and the quality must be real -- not pretentious.

The biggest threat to the achievement of quality in education is not the erosion of standards, but the imposition of demanding, but irrelevant, standards based on unsupported, intuitive assumptions made by educators in the development of educational policy. The issue of quality is an important consideration, given the topic and content of this conference. For I have come to believe that the principal motivation for

nontraditional and/or interdisciplinary programs is the pursuit of valid educational responses to legitimate learning needs and, therefore, suggests the higher probability for the maintenance of real quality in the outcomes. Ironically, many of our colleagues discuss quality programs and innovative programs in terms suggesting that the two are mutually exclusive. Particularly in times of fiscal stress, you have all heard the discussion, "Should we devote our resources to enhancing our quality or enhancing our ability to innovate?" I suggest that effective innovation is an enhancement of quality.

I don't believe that there has occurred anywhere in this country a conscious decision to lower standards and, therefore, lower the quality of educational experiences for students. The problem resulted from rather fundamental defects in the process by which educational policy was made. I have little faith that using those same processes and simplistic responses which created the problem will, in fact, create solutions to them. What I am suggesting as a proper course is neither new nor complicated. We must clearly define and state the objectives and outcomes we seek and evaluate all of our practices and standards as to their effectiveness in achieving those outcomes, keep and strengthen those standards that work, and discard those, however sacred, that cannot demonstrably relate to the achievement of the end. The prestige of the Academy ought to come as a by-product of the quality of the work it does.

As I mentioned earlier, we can, in fact, by appealing to the fundamental elitism of our profession and our society,



greatly enhance our prestige and in the process destroy our rightful aspirations for the achievement of genuine quality. I am fearful that there will be much pressure to do so from both within and without the campus walls. If we succumb, however, the story of our quest for quality in the Eighties, in the words of Shakespeare, will be, "A tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing."

Thank you.

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