

SPEECH - STUDENT SERVICES CONFERENCE

Hartford, Conn - 4/13/84

Let me begin by commending you on the very fact of holding this conference. I have come to appreciate the absolute necessity of educators from time to time removing themselves from the trenches and reflecting on the basic nature of the enterprise they lead. I have given considerable thought as to how I might serve you this morning, and have concluded that I might be most useful if I spoke to, and suggested, some broad reference points which you might apply to each of the topics you will be discussing this afternoon.

For every type of Academy within higher education, there are models and prototypes. When you think of the great community college, you think of Miami-Dade and a few select others. When you think of the private prestigious research university, you think of the Ivy League, University of Chicago, and Stanford. When you think of the technical university, you think of MIT and Cal Tech. When you think of the adult learner, you think of Thomas A. Edison State College. The one thing that the great Academy shares with its fellows is that it understands its *raison-d'etre* -- its constituency, in short, its mission. No institution of any kind or calibre can be truly and generally outstanding unless it truly understands and articulates in its practices, its basic reason for being. Unfortunately, at most institutions, mission statements are

like navels. Everyone has one, but rarely are they taken seriously.

I had the opportunity recently to review the mission statements of four state-supported senior universities within a single southeastern state. These four universities, while all publicly supported, were extremely different in their character, nature, and service populations. One institution was an urban university in the state's largest population center. Another was a technological university in an isolated rural area. The third was an historically Black landgrant university, and the fourth served an extremely isolated rural region of the state. As an exercise, I removed the names from each of these institutions' mission statements and requested a group of faculty to identify the institutions solely by reading the respective mission statements. I was not at all surprised when the institutions were indistinguishable. All of them said essentially that their purpose was to express the educational trinity, i.e., research, teaching, and public service. There was very little in any of the mission statements, with the exception of the landgrant university, which would have given an outside observer any clue to the fact that these four universities were quite different and served quite different constituencies and functions within the state system of higher education

I make this point with you this morning because understanding and internalizing a sense of mission is crucial to any college, but is especially important for a special purpose institution such as a

state technical college. A thoughtful mission statement becomes the reference point and yardstick for evaluating all that an institution does or should do. The internal consistency and logic of institutional policy development must begin from a thoughtful, coherent, well-stated, but more importantly well understood consensus within the institution about the purpose of the Academy. Failure to achieve this invariably results in institutional policy and directions in conflict with itself, ineffective use of resources, and the absolute inability to achieve internal consensus about institutional direction. Without a well-stated sense of purpose, it is impossible for an institution to effectively evaluate itself to know how it is doing. Conclusive assumptions about institutional effectiveness are meaningless unless those assumptions can be validated against the institution's view of its principal purpose. Another way of stating this is brought to mind by a speech President Farris of Stockton State College gave recently entitled "If you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there."

There are two reasons why institutions often have difficulty with either defining or coming to be at peace with their missions. One is that they really don't know or understand what their mission is. This malady is frequently associated with the emerging state college that finds itself somewhere on the path between state normal school and big time university. The other reason, and more commonly applicable to your kind of institution, is an intellectual understanding of the missions, but failure to achieve

internalization and noncognitive commitment to your purpose. Just as in child rearing, we tend to raise our children as we were raised. We tend to teach our students as we were taught. On the face of it, that sounds okay. The problem, however, is that those of you teaching and leading Connecticut's technical colleges as well as its community colleges are "teaching" in institutions very much different from the institutions in which you were taught. Many of you and your faculties received your undergraduate and graduate training in institutions very different from the ones you are currently serving. If you bring to your current great task the norms and reference points of a completely different kind of institution, you should expect dissonance in trying to make the two fit. One should be mindful of the truism that being equal does not mean being the same. While the technical college and the quality of its work can be the equal of its counterparts in other sectors, it is not the same and requires different approaches, different techniques, and different assumptions if they are each to be effective but fulfill the very important and different missions. You are the technical colleges. Be proud of your special mission - wear it on your sleeve. Glorify in those things that make you distinctive and different. Be mindful of the temptations to emulate others who go a different path for different and legitimate reasons.

A word about standards. Standards are a means to an end, not an end unto themselves. The objective of the Academy should be to raise quality--not raise standards. Much of the debate on standards

ignores the fundamental question of the standard's relationship to the quality it's attempting to measure. I believe in testing. SAT scores provide valuable and useful data from which to make judgments about students' preparation and probability for success. The problem with the SAT score is that it does not differentiate between those students who lack the intellectual sufficiency to do collegiate work and those students who are smart enough but lack basic skills. An institution can successfully remediate basic skills. It cannot remediate substantive intellectual deficiencies. A college's admissions and access posture must take into account this dichotomy in its assessment and remediation design. Nor do test scores alone assess such important noncognitive factors such as motivation, self-concept strength, self-discipline, and other personality factors that we know to be critical to the success of a student's collegiate career. Having said all of this, what do I recommend? Former Defense Secretary Schlesinger said that two tests must be met before this country should ever commit its armed forces to a mission: clarity of purpose and sufficiency of forces. The Secretary's advice applies to these issues as well. While, obviously, the social policy concerns and social justice implications represent the fundamental motivation for the institution's efforts, the focus of the institution's analysis must be the educational issues first, and the social policy consequences later. I would suggest as to the "clarity of purpose" the following set of guiding principles:

- I. The objective of the college's admissions apparatus should be to estimate the student's ability to have a successful academic experience at the institution. This judgment should not be a question of competition. The essential judgment is whether Student A can reasonably expect to be successful, not whether Student A will do better than Student B, or has better grades than Student B, or has higher test scores than Student B. The only competitive factor that is legitimate for consideration is if enrollment caps do not allow you to accept both Students A and B and you have to choose one over another. If you are faced with such an environment, then the affirmative action/social policy issues ought to be invoked to safeguard the enrollment of the protected classes.
- II. The college ought to use alternatives and more intensive assessment techniques for evaluating the student potential of applicants who do not meet the desirable profiles of the general student body as measured by traditional means. The objective of this alternative assessment approach should be to differentiate between those students who are smart enough but need skills help, versus those students whose deficiencies are much more fundamental.

III. Define the reasonable limitations of remediation which is realistic and achievable within the context of the college's resources and academic programs. To accomplish this definition, one must document, through appropriate research, the skills threshold below which success at the college becomes improbable. Example: If you determine that a reading level of at least the 11th grade is necessary for a successful matriculation, then the 11th grade level ought be established as the threshold for entering freshmen. Under this model, the next question becomes, "What can reasonably be expected on the part of the college and the students to secure remediation in reading to at least the 11th grade level?" You will find that research has established pretty well how much remediation can be expected per unit of work. You may find that a special program in a pre-college enrollment can raise the reading level of a student by two grades. You would, therefore, need to limit your admissions to students having 9th grade reading levels or above. The numbers I have used are totally hypothetical and I merely used them to illustrate an approach.

The sum total of all of this logically follows from a very simple set of assumptions: admit students who can make it, but make

sure the standards and the process for assessing those standards are valid. Admit students who can make it if they get help if you can reasonably provide the help. Don't admit students where success is highly improbable or if the amount of help they need is substantially beyond what you can reasonably provide. While I know this approach sounds frightfully obvious, there are few institutions in the country that have built their admissions and remediation efforts around this or any other coherent and consistent set of tested assumptions.

A few words about quality. I am an ardent supporter of contemporary efforts designed to enhance the quality of education at all levels in our society. 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. I have come to seriously question whether the path that many of us are pursuing will in fact achieve the stated outcome - the enhancement of quality in education.

Unfortunately, I have concluded that much of our contemporary rhetoric as well as policy design represents a pursuit of status, prestige, not quality. I am concerned that what is often lost in the formulation of educational policy is that quality assumes validity and that prestige and collegiate elitism can be achieved not only in the absence of, but at the direct expense of, both validity and quality. I fear that we have been seduced by a notion which suggests that we blindly create and define standards, raise

them and then become self-satisfied that we have effectively enhanced quality.

I would call to your attention the recent action of the National Collegiate Athletic Association assisted by others at the American Council on Education in establishing mandatory cut-off scores for collegiate athletes using standardized tests. Little note was taken in the debate on these regulations of the fact that President Anrig of the Educational Testing Service indicated that the SAT was not designed or valid for this purpose. Nor was much attention given to the protest expressed by Sandy Astin that his own data had been misused and misinterpreted in the conclusions drawn by the NCAA to justify its policy considerations.

Make no mistake, I support the notion that student athletes are first students and I certainly 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 those educators who ought to know better adopting a policy so significant in its implications yet so poorly supported by any significant data that suggests a kind of unitary relationship between a test score and the ability to achieve in higher education that the NCAA action implies. The NCAA has now created a commission to examine the issue as to whether educational assumptions of the policy already enacted are 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 well-deserved 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 a 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, where factors such as motivation, self-concept strength, teacher and counselor recommendations, and other factors 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.

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.

In closing, I would like to point out that while I am greatly a critic of some of what goes on within higher education, I do so with a deep-felt and abiding appreciation of the essential good we do for our society and its members whom we serve. I am requesting that you do something new and innovative by in fact returning to methodologies that are old and traditional. I am asking that you replace ideology with analysis and foresake the pursuit of status for the attainment of quality and validity. The positive balance we have thus far maintained is due in large part to our resolve to be uplifting in our efforts and committed in our resolve that the future shall be better than the past. To those of you who become weary in the contest, I leave you with these words from Maciavelli: "There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things." (Maciavelli, 15:13.)

Thank you.

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