

COLLEGE OF NEW ROCHELLE REMARKS

June 17, 1987

To my friends and colleagues at the College of New Rochelle, thank you for inviting me to participate in your deliberations of this day. I am no stranger to this institution. I first visited you in the fall of 1981 as you were preparing for a Middle States visiting team, and last year I had the opportunity to conduct a review of one of your branch campuses for the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. Dean Blake and I have served together on the Board of Trustees of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, and I have come to know, admire, and respect your president from our first meeting some six years ago.

I also come representing an institution of kindred spirit; for in a very real sense the College of New Rochelle, its School of New Resources, and Thomas A. Edison State College share a special responsibility in the leadership of an educational movement. We have made as a central focus of our collective existence the provision of higher education of exemplary quality to adult learners. It is because my previous visits to you have been evaluatory in their nature, with a focus on the quality assurance processes that all of us in the academy embrace, I would like to share with you this morning some thoughts on how quality assurance becomes institutionalized in an institutional outcomes assessment processes.

Collegiate outcomes assessment is an important topic across the country, and I wish I could tell you that the early models for its implementation were positive and useful. Unfortunately, I fear that more of the examples, at least in the public sector, give credence to the bias that a government has enormous capacity for destroying good ideas through the implementation of bad and ill-conceived practices. In New Jersey, I believe we have the opportunity to engage in meaningful institutional outcomes assessment and do it right. I must quickly add that, while I am cautiously optimistic based on those things I've seen to date, we have not yet gone past that threshold for the opportunity to really screw it up.

I'd like to discuss these things with you because quality assurance, self-study, self-evaluation, and the entire concept of outcomes assessment are fundamental and critical to those of us who would dare to experiment and innovate. Indeed, the only appropriate rationale for innovation is that by doing some things differently we do them better. The enhancement of quality has to be the objective of innovation, therefore, valuing the assessment of quality is fundamental to the cause of the innovator. Without going into the dynamics of the public policy discussions surrounding institutional outcomes assessment in New Jersey, I would like to outline the process we have embarked upon at Thomas Edison State College and share with you some implications and possibly some advice as to how some things learned by us might be useful to you.

First, a few definitions and some restatements of the obvious. Institutional outcomes assessment is focused on the institution. It is a studied, methodical way of an institution's measuring and evaluating itself against its stated objectives and purpose. It is not an evaluation of students or individual student learning outcomes; neither is it an evaluation of individual faculty or administrators, but rather, done properly, a source of information and useful feedback on the effectiveness of the college's programs, structures, and curricula. Secondly, by its very nature, outcomes assessment must be centered and referenced on the special and unique character of the particular institution.

As one would expect, well done institutional outcomes assessment approaches will vary from institution to institution in direct proportion to the distinctiveness of the institutional mission and processes. Although the School of New Resources and Thomas Edison State College have very similar missions and serve a very similar clientele, their approaches and processes are very different from one another and, therefore, their approaches to outcomes assessment will necessarily be very different from one another.

Institutional self-analysis must always start from an institution's understanding of its mission. For the School of New Resources, there is a second step of refinement; in your case, your mission defines your clientele. Therefore, your programmatic effectiveness must be judged not only from the point-of-view of your fidelity with your mission, but of equal importance, relevance to its special and unique characteristics of the students you serve.

A great deal is known about the characteristics of the adult learner in contemporary higher education. Your special approach to curricula development, your extensive processes for the assessment of prior learning, are all built upon assumptions, rather well-researched assumptions, about the assets and learning styles of older adults. Simply stated, these students' two most special prominent characteristics are: first, they are highly motivated and goal-oriented; secondly, they generally bring considerable learning with them when they come to the academy. Secondary characteristics are that, when properly informed and provided with sufficient resources, they are also very independent and responsible in taking charge of their educational programs, activities, and objectives. And finally, and perhaps the most important differentiating factor, is their ability, willingness, and expectation for accepting accountability for the decisions they make in achieving their learning objectives.

This statement is not unexpected within the context of the rights and responsibilities of general citizenship. It is not news that adults daily make decisions about aspects of their lives and are then held accountable personally and institutionally for the consequences of those decisions. Indeed, in this bicentennial year of our constitution, our entire political structure makes this same assumption about our adult population.

This, however, is very different from the expected posture between traditional education at all levels and traditional-age students. While it is true that colleges and universities expect a much higher level of maturation of its students than do secondary schools, the faculty is expected to carry a much greater burden in both the responsibility and accountability for the intellectual development of its students. So, the task for self-evaluation for you is not only are your programs effectively delivering their stated purposes, but are they doing so in ways that are consistent and compatible with those special and different things we have come to know as characteristics of your students?

Now for a brief comparative primer about Thomas A. Edison State College. Like your School of New Resources, we are exclusively devoted to serving the adult learner. We currently enroll approximately 6,000 students where the average age is about 40. Unlike you, we have a very traditional curricula structure for our 4 baccalaureate and 6 associate degrees. Like you we make effective use of various forms of prior learning assessment. Unlike you we have no formal classroom instruction of our own. Students transfer in credits from courses taken elsewhere or they study with us directly through what we call Directed Independent Study, which are media-supported courses guided by a faculty mentor. Like you we take a consumerist approach in that our students are in charge of their educational processes and objectives. Unlike you we have no standing faculty of our own; but like you we are committed to academic quality of the highest order.



The approach we are taking in institutional outcomes assessment starts with a revisitation to our college mission statement. Central to that mission is the definition of our student clientele and the special characteristics of that constituency. To achieve our mission and serve this clientele, we construct programs and engage in programmatic activity. We have constructed a matrix or academic taxonomy which allows us to examine our work from certain mission-sensitive points-of-view. There is a standard-setting exercise, a determination of measures by which to evaluate those standards, a process for collecting data, and then a feedback loop for incorporating those things learned from the assessment into the formulation of institutional policy and informing our consumers - our students.

The five elements of the matrix are as follows: first, those things elemental to the notion of "student empowerment." If one assumes a student-directed approach to higher education where students are responsible and accountable for their decision-making, it becomes incumbent upon the institution to provide students with timely, accurate information from which the students can make intelligent decisions about their academic programs. We do this through a number of activities, through our publications, through our advising, degree planning, transfer credit evaluations, etc.

What are the standards? Simply stated - do these things. In fact, provide timely, accurate information that students view as useful to decisions. Who sets the standard and how is it measured?

Well, obviously, the students set the standard and we measure it by asking them. Do, in fact, these processes provide you with timely, accurate information, and has and is it useful to you in making decisions about your interaction with Thomas Edison State College? We will ask them; they will tell us, and from that we will make judgments about the effectiveness of those activities.

The other four elements of the matrix are prior learning assessment, and, of course, we know that there are many ways that one assesses the validity and reliability of prior learning assessment.

The third element is the curricula and student learning outcomes, and, of course, we have all kinds of ways of evaluating the validity of our curricula and the reliability of student outcomes.

The fourth element is instruction, and, of course, all of us have had experience in the evaluation of instruction.

And the fifth element, which may be special to us, is system-building, and as you may know, in a real sense Thomas Edison State College represents a mini-system of higher education in New Jersey for adult learners. Through out Statewide Testing and Assessment Center, we do prior learning assessment for over 30 colleges and universities in the state. We have transfer articulation agreements with practically every institution in the state, and we have ongoing relationships and joint ventures with over 40 New Jersey corporate clients.

We are engaged in the exercise of sorting out our programs and activities according to the five elements of this matrix. Of course, we do not presume to evaluate all of our activities by this model. We are engaged in development and solicitation of philanthropy as an important activity which, in this model, is not considered. The effectiveness of our management, as assessed by things like audits, is likewise not addressed under this model. Important institutional objectives like minority recruitment and affirmative action are clearly relevant to institutional self-assessment, and this we have and will continue to do, but not necessarily using this model.

The two most important aspects of this entire model first come in the exercise of setting standards, for in doing so we are forced to deal with the congruity and consistency of our position in reconfiguring institutional practices with those things we know about, and consistency and compliance with our institutional mission. The second benefit is the ability to provide good and useful information both to ourselves and to our students as to the effectiveness and reality of our work.

But there is, in addition, a very important bottom line benefit or this approach of special significance to institutions like yours and mine. You see, in my experience, the biggest challenge for those of us who would innovate is to defend against the tendency to transform the innovation into the creation of the new orthodoxy. For it is very difficult for us to avoid the temptation and natural seductive tendencies to recreate in our institutions our individual



educational experiences. For surely, the biggest influence on how we raise our children is how we were raised. The greatest influence on how we teach is how we were taught. And while that experience base is an asset at other institutions, it is deadly for colleges like ours. For, you see, none of us were educated in institutions as those we now serve.

I would like to give you two examples to illustrate this point. I was a Dean at Towson State College in the early 70's and that institution at that time shared with you the attribute of having two separate student bodies. the day school traditional age student body and about 6,000 evening school adults. The Student Affairs Division at Towson became very concerned over the fact that the adult students were not participating in the "student life" of the college and experienced a series of frustrations after deploying a series of activities which failed to attract the interest of the adult student population.

When, in the late 70's, Tennessee State University, an institution made up almost exclusively of traditional age students, took into its midst through merger and acquired the University of Tennessee at Nashville, an institution exclusively made up of adult learners, they likewise experienced concern and frustration as to the inability of involving adult students in the student life of the institution.

In both cases, the respective universities at long length struck upon the idea of asking the students directly what kinds of things should be done to involve them in campus student life. Their response was swift and clear. The answer was - nothing. What those institutions were told by their respective student bodies was that we are here to achieve specific educational objectives that we have defined; we want the processes of the institution to be reasonable, clear, and effective; we want high quality; and we want to be left alone.

At Thomas Edison State College, in the spring of 1983, we went through an exercise of reevaluating our mode for delivering student advising. Prior to that time we had a caseload advising system where each advisor was assigned a specific caseload of advisees for whom these advisors would be a vehicle in personalized one-on-one interaction between the student and the institution. Of course, all of us, and especially the advisors, were absolutely convinced that this one-on-one personalized attention was an essential element of effective advising and institutional effectiveness.

Unfortunately, increased enrollment demands did not make the caseload approach very cost-effective. But the interesting thing was the data we collected from the students said very clearly that accurate, timely information was more important to them than personal one-on-one interaction with an advisor. As a consequence, we abandoned the caseload approach and created an advisement center by which a student could be served by anyone who received the student's inquiry or request for service. Ironically, while the

advising staff initially saw this as a deterioration in the quality of our work, the students saw it consistently and unequivocally as an improvement in the quality of advising. The fact of the matter is that our caseload approach was more a response to the professional needs of our advisors to advise than to the student's need for advising. A practice that our professional educators initially received with alarm as a retreat from quality was embraced by our students as a quality enhancement.

We are wise to be student-centered as well as student-sensitive. It is for this reason that we view it as critical to, in some structured way, focus on those aspects for which students are rightly in charge and accountable, and separate these things from the legitimate purview of us as professional educators.

There are lessons in these things for both of us. We have learned to trust our students in setting the standards as well as making evaluatory judgments about those things for which they are the valid authority. We have also learned how to separate those things from those elements within the appropriate purview of professional educators.

I have some advice for you. Though you may not embrace our approach, it is important for you to create structures which will force you to challenge your assumptions and practices when tested against your stated purposes and student characteristics. You have an enormously creative approach to student participation in curricula development. Within the parameters set by the faculty, your students annually recreate the institution's curricula.

The appropriateness of this is consistent with the notion of student empowerment and ability to be self-directed and accountable for these judgments. The contextual framework provided by the faculty is appropriate to the expertise of a community of scholars. However, a caution - keep the standing faculty of the School of New Resources very very small. Select them and focus them in the area of curricula development. Be preoccupied with the framework of curricula and broad planning outcomes and avoid being intrusive into those prerogatives now assigned to your students.

You cannot recruit and maintain a faculty of sufficient breadth and depth so as to allow your students to regularly recreate the curricula and expect to have the in-house expertise to respond to such fluid and liquid instructional demands. It is paramount that if you are to remain faithful with your stated approaches, you cannot, as Edison did, put the learning needs of your student in competition with the professional needs of your faculty. You would be unique indeed if you possessed the institutional self-discipline for the students to successfully compete in that arena.

I do not wish to be perceived as picking on the faculty. Indeed the affection for dogma is certainly not the monopoly of the practicing scholars. I remember the debates I had with some of your leadership in my 1981 visit concerning your stated lack of requirements. I recall challenging that assumption - one, because I wasn't sure it was a good idea; and, secondly, in your practice you clearly had requirements. While I don't recall what they were, I

was told that there was a common expected pattern of progress for students and that in the history of the school no student had ever come through without meeting this pattern. In my view, that sounded like a requirement, but I was strongly admonished that this coincidence was the result of "vigorous advising," but not a requirement. The fact of the matter is it was a requirement and it should have been a requirement and the inability of this policy to be honest with itself and its students was one of the best examples I could give to you as to the dangers of your innovation becoming a ball and chain when it becomes the new dogma or orthodoxy.

Of course, what we tell our students, our consumers, is also of critical importance. Half of the graduates of Thomas Edison State College go on to graduate and professional school, and 90% are admitted to the program of their first choice. The average graduate is with us for two years from enrollment to commencement. If you begin this institution with 60 or more credits and if your objective is to go on to graduate and professional school, coming to Edison makes a lot of sense. If, on the other hand, you are entering our institution with 0 college credits and without much probability of earning credits through prior learning assessment or other means, you're probably looking at being with us 9 or 10 years. Those are two very different patterns of interaction within the same student body and within the same college.



If my institution is respectful of the notion of student empowerment, then we have an obligation to give to them two very different students information for them to have accurate but very different expectations of what their tenure and experience with us is likely to be.

In closing, what I have taken much too long to say is that we must take pains and go to great lengths to continually challenge ourselves and challenge each other to test, revalidate, and reaffirm what we do. Trust our students; it is for their benefit we exist and they have an enormous capacity to keep us honest if we will listen to them.

Be preoccupied with quality and its assessment, for in the final analysis its preservation can be our only rationale for the innovation we seek to deploy. And in the end, take note of the pattern of political revolutions; for we in higher education are not immune from those same processes, for in the innovation of today is the creation of the orthodoxy of tomorrow.

For special institutions like Thomas Edison State College and the College of New Resources, continued innovation and student-centered responsiveness to adult learners goes beyond a casual interest. Our leadership is a mandate - it is our responsibility.

Thank you.