

Chapter 17

A Look at Higher Education and Needed Changes

Overview:

Higher education and public schools have different roles and philosophies. The role of higher education is to develop specialists. Public schools role is to help every individual to learn the basic skills and knowledge which they will need to become independent and a contributing member of society. Colleges and universities can be selective on students admitted and can require, which they should, a certain level of performance. Public schools must accept everyone regardless of their ability and try to help them achieve to the best of their ability.

The primary focus of these articles has been the public education system. But because of the unique program for training or retraining teachers that that university and state permitted us to develop it was felt that it was applicable to higher education institutes, especially ones training teachers or instructional personnel. It was an opportunity to test such program in a university and in the public schools. This would enable people to see if there were other more effective ways to train and retrain teachers and improve the quality of education. The primary thrust of the program was directed toward the School of Education and the public schools even though it would have beneficial results in other areas.

The Higher Education System in the United States is probably still the best in the world. Higher education institutions, unlike the public schools, can be selective in their student population. However, the quality of the general student body has declined in the last fifty years. Part of this decline may be attributed to the way public institutions are funded. At one time the colleges received a certain amount of funds so they tended to be very selective in the student they enrolled. Then the funding process changed and colleges received funds based on the number of hours students generated. The more hours generated the more funds the institution received. This coupled with the ease of getting student loans and scholarships greatly expanded the number of students going to college. Another element has been the emphasis of society has placed on a college degree and thinking that everyone should have a college education. While this is a desirable goal it is impractical and in some cases determinately to some students. Not all students have the academic ability to be successful in a university or four year college. Unfortunately the curriculum of most public high schools is geared to preparing student for college. There is nothing wrong with the schools and parents with wanting kids to go to college but they need to recognize that everyone is not college material. Over fifty percent of students enrolling in a four year college or university will drop out without completing a degree. Parents and kids should know that there are many good alternatives. Community colleges, technical schools are excellent places for students to learn a skill, a trade, become a professional technician or to see if they have the academic ability to be successful in a four year college.

Problems and changes needed in institutions of higher education.

Most colleges and universities are composed of a collection of colleges or schools. Each college or school generally has a liberal arts school which offers the basic academic courses that are generally required of students regardless of their major. These courses are usually taken during their first two years. It is during this time that the student begins to think about specializing in a single profession. A major problem that most colleges have is that they admit too many students who are not ready for college level work or lack the academic ability. Seldom do the colleges provide the counseling necessary to help the student recognize the problem and taking steps to correct it or select a different objective. So many students struggle for a year or two before they realize that they are wasting their time and money. This is evident when over fifty percent of the student entering the college never graduate or get a degree. Much of this problem is the result of a quality of the public education and the unrealistic expectations of students, parents and the public. Too often the grading system used in most of the public schools have little meaning and certainly don't correctly inform the student or parents the actual performance level of the student. Without this information the student often enters situations where failure is almost certain.

Colleges and universities have many of the problems that are found in public schools. However the roles of the institutions of higher learning and those of public schools differ. Public schools' role is to help every child to develop their talents and skills to the best of their ability so that they may become independent and a contributing member of society. Colleges and universities' role is to develop individuals who are competent in the academic or profession of their choice. Public education is forced to take all kids regardless of their ability while colleges may be selective as they can establish standards for admission to their schools or programs. Too many colleges and universities allow students of questionable academic ability to enroll. Either as a result of the lack of academic ability or other factors about fifty percent of the students that enter will never graduate or get a degree even though the standards have been lowered in many areas. One of the major problems is grad inflation. Too many professors tend to give students grades that their performances don't justify. This gives the student a false sense of their ability and is misleading to employers. The result is that it cheapens the degree and the granting college or university.

A major problem facing universities today and jeopardizing the innovation and quality its student is political correctness and restricting controversial ideas. A great advantage American universities have had in the past was an arena where students and professor could discuss any idea or issue without fear. In fact it was probably the only time in their life this is possible. This freedom of thought and action has brought many wonderful innovations and inventions which have helped make this country so great and envy of the world.

Schools of Education:

The primary focus of this book is the public education system with emphasis on the schools of education. The following material is focused on the training of teachers. Most schools of education are doing a poor job of preparing teachers for the job today. They, like the public schools, are using strategies that were good for past generations and conditions but are totally inadequate for the demands of today. The world has changed and with the change has come new needs and requirements. Unfortunately most schools of education have not recognized the change and still operate as they have been for the past hundred years. Yes there have been some that have made changes but overall their impact has been minor. The University of Houston tried to implement the competency base approach to teacher education. While the concept was excellent and enhanced the traditional program it did little to improve the skills and knowledge the students would need to be effective teachers. Probably the best approach schools of education can use is an experimental teacher development program developed by Strong with the cooperation and help of Texas Southern University, local school districts and the US Office of Education. Strong and his associates with the aid of the local, state and national educational leaders developed a competency based objective- diagnostic-prescriptive education program for training and retraining teachers and professors. The program was implemented and tested at the University and in the public schools. It should be noted that the program started out to retrain minority and other teachers that might lose their job because of changes dictated by desegregation laws and regulations. It soon became evident that the approach would be effective at the junior - senior and graduate level in colleges with the cooperation of the liberal arts school. The liberal arts departments are primarily responsible for the basic content subjects of English, mathematics, history, languages, and science. Schools of education working with the liberal arts can develop objectives in these areas that would be most helpful for teachers.

Once the school was granted permission to abandon traditional university course requirements and class schedules an instructional team of some of the country's best specialist in critical areas of education and human development was formed. The Team using data from research, interaction with people from the universities, local, state, national school teachers and administrators, and general public a set of objectives was adopted. Then using subject and area specialist the objectives were structured on a continuum. In addition to the required knowledge and skills each participant could request any other related skill and the team would help the individual master the request. This was possible because if the Team didn't have the expertise needed they would find someone who did.

Since the program was competency based a participant must demonstrate the minimum level of performance the instructor and program required. Time was not a critical factor as the level of performance was the criterion. The participant might achieve it in a day or a month. It was possible to do this because the instruction team was employed on a year round and responsible on an eight hour day. In the Teacher Development program each section had thirty graduate students who could earn the equivalent of twelve hours each semester, thus enabling them to meet the University's requirements. In addition to meeting the program's requirement they had to pass all university required examination if they were working for a degree.

Experience showed that the team could probably handle many more students. The only limiting factor would be education institutions where they could work with students. A question was raised about meeting the number of hours a student could earn and how would they accumulate enough to graduate. It was finally decided that students who met the competency requirements would earn 12 to 15 hours of credit and they could be equated to hours earned in normal course work. This was easy to do as the basic objectives of the all the important courses and many others were included in the Programs objectives.

Problems that will be encountered.

When this type of program is presented to the professors you will most likely get much opposition and this response "That is not the way we operate and have been operating for hundreds of years so why should we change"? In some of the technical areas this probably is valid but in areas which deal with human behavior it is not the most effective way to achieve the desired results. This is especially true in areas like education, psychology, sociology. In subjects that are more skill based it is important that specific measureable objectives and standards be established so that a person completing the course has achieved at least a minimum level knowledge and competency in the skills and subject needed for their profession. At the same time the instructors and students must have the time and freedom to explore new ideas and challenge old ones.

It means restructuring some schools such as education especially at the junior senior and graduate levels. We found when developing the Strong-objective-diagnostic-prescriptive model that the traditional approach used in colleges and universities would not work. So a team of specialists was created. Personnel for the team was selected nationwide using data collected from meeting with hundreds of students, teachers, administrators, parents, state and local government officials and local businessmen, officials and lay people which they felt was required for a good instructor it was decided that the university team needed specialist in: child development and primary education, reading and language arts, mathematics, and a psychologists versed creative thinking and human behavior. This team would be supplemented with ancillary specialists whenever their expertise was needed. They were selected from many places, professions, business, and occupations. The core team was full time instructors and ancillary personnel were selected for their special expertise and if they were able to devote the time necessary to insure the participants could or could not meet their requirements. Another problem is getting instructors to change their teaching assignment from isolated courses to an objective continuum program. This means that instructors and professors will be on duty or on call eight hours a day. There is no question that it will be a controversial and difficult task but it can be done and is necessary to achieve the quality of graduates the country needs. Change is needed as our present system is failing to do so.

Some possible alternatives would be to offer students during their junior and senior years the objective-diagnostic-prescriptive program in place of the traditional program. Another approach would be to offer any graduate student, who qualifies, the choice of the traditional program or the objective-diagnostic-prescriptive program. In this program students would attend an all-day program during the summer and conduct a class of students and attend seminars during the following school year.

Advantages of an Objective-Diagnostic-Prescriptive-Program

The primary advantage is that it will produce facilitators of learning who have the expertise to work with students in any situation and know how to find and utilize all needed available resources. It would insure the public that all graduates would have met the minimum level of confidence that they could be effective teachers or facilitators learning.

Schools of education or even public school systems working with colleges and universities could train any student or teacher with a basic academic foundation to be an effective facilitator of learning in about 12 months if they had the necessary knowledge of the subject they will teach. Please note I have not discussed off campus computer generated interactive programs as I don't think they would be applicable to the Objective Diagnostic Prescriptive approach to teacher training as personal interaction is vital to the program. However, I think it is a valuable tool for many programs.