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REMARKS TO PRESIDENTS COUNCIL NASULGC
WASHINGTON, D.C.
NOVEMBER 16, 1976

My purpose this afternoon, in response to the invitation of our chairman, Phil Shriver, is to introduce for the Council's consideration issues bearing upon the rise in average grades and the decline in basic literacy that seemingly afflicts both the public schools and the colleges and universities of the country.

No one of us here today is unacquainted with the alleged decline in the performance of our students in reading, writing, and mathematics as measured, at least, by the SAT and ACT scores of entering freshmen and the corresponding decline in scores achieved by graduating seniors in the Graduate Record Exam. Similarly, each of us here will have our own view as to the severity and meaning of these trends and how our respective institutions should respond or adapt to them. But whatever our view may be, we surely cannot wish the issues away or pretend that the public will be indifferent either to our responsibility in the matter or to our opinions.

There is, of course, disagreement as to the meaning of the decline in average scores attained on the ACT, SAT and the GRE, the inflation in grades and the observations of our teaching colleagues that students are in reality and in general less well prepared for university work and more in need of remedial assistance than before, e.g., the October 25, 1976 issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education featured an article entitled "The Decline in Literacy Is a Fiction, if Not a Hoax"; the November issue of Change Magazine devoted a special section to a discussion of "The Decline of Literacy" which was treated not as a question but as an assertion; and the Los Angeles Times

ran a major three-part series on the problem entitled "The Decline of American Education." The major national periodicals have dealt with this general issue as well in recent months and, I suspect, we have seen only the beginning rather than the end.

There is, of course, no scarcity of theories offered both to explain and understand this phenomenon. For example, many believe that student disquietude in the sixties took a heavy toll of both academic standards and the faculty's commitment to them, leaving a legacy of weakened will and a dispirited faculty teaching students less seriously interested in learning and increasingly insistent about grading practices. Others believe that the public schools abdicated their essential educational responsibilities and the impact of the abandonment of standards K-12 has merely found its way into the higher learning at a time when resistance to such by the universities and colleges was at a low ebb. Others suggest that the broadening of the pool of prospective students has in itself placed downward pressure both on performance and institution. Still others suggest that the fundamental and massive shift from the more basic requirements to a plethora of electives, both in the high schools and the colleges and universities, has deprived students of the opportunity to become proficient in the basic communication skills. Still others allege that the objective measures used to assess student competency and skill in these fields are themselves fundamentally flawed and not to be trusted. And still others suggest that television, changes in family structure, mobility, and the impact of vocational and career education have had their own measure of influence.

I could go on but will not. Each of us, according to our own interest in the matter, can pursue it further as we wish. Nevertheless, and irrespective

of our own biases, it is our issue and one in which this Council, at least it seems to me, ought to have a serious and sustained interest. In the minds of the public, it has the potential of becoming as visible a concern in the 1970's as were the issues of governance and student unrest in the 1960's. Indeed, as educators, our reasons for occupying ourselves with this problem in the 1970's seem even more compelling than were those motivating our reactions to the 60's; for if the decline in literacy is not a fiction, and not a hoax, but is real and enduring, then we shall be obliged to contend with the issue with the full measure of commitment, dedication, and professional skill that we possess. The credibility and worth of our institutions ' very existence are at issue here.

Research dealing with this problem is spotty and inconclusive but sufficient to warrant a more inclusive and systematic effort on the part of those most interested; and this Association should be among them. Personally, I am in agreement with those who hold that there has been a real and absolute diminishing of standards in our colleges and universities and that the problem is a very serious one indeed. The inflation in grades has tended only to mask the problem and to have delayed our acknowledgment of it.

President Shriver asked only that I introduce the matter today, trusting that the ensuing conversation will afford members of this Council the opportunity to decide if it is further deserving of the Council's time and genuine attention and, if so, how the Presidents might register their concern and arrange their participation and involvement both in helping to define the problem and in seeking solutions to it. Thank you.