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Publication Date

1978-03-01

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Educational Standards: A Moving Target

I TAKE particular pleasure in our identity as a *Western* association. If a region is a state of mind as much as a location, then we in the West can surely claim a distinctive outlook and will, it is hoped, have something to say to the rest of the country. To Daniel Webster, you may remember, everything out here was just the Great American Desert. He once opposed a mail route between Independence and the mouth of the Columbia River, declaring he would not vote one cent from the public treasury to bring the Pacific Coast an inch nearer to Boston. "What," he wanted to know, "do we want with this vast, worthless area?" Even as late as the 1930's, a condescending eastern senator thought he could tolerate two senators from each of the western states as long as they were only seen but not heard.

This conference, I hope, will be heard. The subject deserves it. The theme, "Walls and Windows," permits one to play with those images: walls both support and obstruct, they can shore up or keep out; windows afford a view but on occasion glare and permit warm and cold air to move in and out. I should like to supplement these metaphors by thinking of educational standards as a moving target, in the hope that it will help illustrate why talking about standards is so difficult.

Educational standards are a moving target in relation to a number of significant ongoing changes — changes in our schools and colleges, in the country at large, and in the communities we serve. The changes are of consequential range and magnitude, for they are conceptual as well as social and technological. They are substantive changes in purpose and value as well as peripheral changes in process and procedure. The changes are interconnected. They form a fascinating pattern, a pattern in motion, a moving target. And, as with all moving targets, one must anticipate its position, aiming not where it is, but where it will be if a hit is to be made. I hope in my brief remarks to identify some of the changes and to fix our sights on the target, while leaving to the scheduled sessions of this conference the job of finding its range.

Standards are a moving target in relation to knowledge itself, for knowledge is constantly changing. It is ever growing, providing new perspectives, demanding new tools and techniques for its discovery, transmission, and application. The paradox, of course, is that as the frontiers of learning advance, the horizon recedes. Knowledge begets new knowledge in quantum jumps, whether in our exploration of the outer space of the perceived universe or the inner space of the still mysterious self. In both directions teachers and taxpayers alike are hard-pressed to provide instruction of a kind suited to the present as well as to the future. A razor once sufficed to make one both barber and surgeon; a few books made a library. Nowadays, computer centers and electron microscopes are taken for granted, as is the need

for great libraries and other resources indispensable to learning. The subdividing of knowledge that characterizes the curricula and research of our institutions tends both to fragment the learning process and insulate our students and faculty from seeing the wholeness of a problem or issue. "Expertness," Stephen Bailey reminds us, "tends to be a friend of the particular and an enemy of the general." Meanwhile, old skills once learned in apprenticeships at home, on the farm, or in the shop have been institutionalized and, in substantial measure, these functions and the heightened expectations associated with them have been transferred to the educational system. The blending in our curricula of the imperatives of specialization and the necessities of a general or liberal education is, on the one hand, much more difficult as knowledge itself expands. On the other hand, it is all the more essential if knowledge is to have a completeness and coherence useful to the individual as he lives his life and helpful to society as mankind collectively struggles with the complexities and dysfunctions of the modern condition. Our institutions of higher learning could do a better job of achieving this purpose were we to have the objective more clearly in focus as we make judgments about what we teach, what we expect our students to learn, and the standards we apply to the performance of each.

Beyond knowledge, however, lies wisdom. Knowledge cannot, as Theodore Gross reminds us, "be only the sociology and economics and political science of the moment, ever shifting, stimulating an anxiety that stems from uncertainty, fogged by statistics that carry with them apparent truth." The knowledge most worth having may not be data so much as a cultivated daring of the spirit, a daring born of attitudes and aptitudes, the skills of interpretation, a capacity for intellectual discrimination. Such skills lead to the self-reliance and self-confidence that come from knowing some things well. These are what Emerson called granite truths. Knowledge of these truths, coupled with judgment, yield wisdom. The nurturing and possession of wisdom by teacher and student alike, therefore, must be an essential consideration in any discussion of education and the standards we employ to monitor and measure its worth.

Standards are a moving target in relation to social and technological changes which, in turn, stimulate further changes in knowledge. Our schools and colleges are not only the objects of these changes but their agents as well. As agents, responsible for the growth and preservation of knowledge and wisdom, we share responsibility for their consequences. Our expertise and judgment engage and influence the society surrounding us as it in turn bears in upon our options and opportunities. Pygmalion's statue, however beautiful, was stillborn until Aphrodite breathed life into it. The academy breathes life into society; and the reverse is true. The interchange of such life-giving influences impacts both educational standards and the velocity of the change in them. The standards we set also influence alumni and public opinion. They can either increase respect for the worth and work of our institutions of higher education or diminish the deserving nature of their cause.

Standards are a moving target in relation to the changing composition of today's student body. These implicate admission, grading, and graduation practices that, as we see daily in the news, can take us out of committees and into the courts. Grade inflation, floating admission standards, and accom-

modating graduation requirements are signs of the times. People's views about them vary significantly and, sometimes, heatedly. However, the issues, which our commissions on quality and equality in education labor so hard to define and resolve, come down, finally, to the claims of justice on the one hand and mercy on the other. Our task is to put high abstractions and hopeless regulations at the service of humble realities, to reconcile rigid legal demands and institutional requirements with fragile human needs and aspirations.

As applied to standards, justice has to do with the inexorable laws governing the subject matter we teach, the unbending but groundbreaking truths of the alphabet and the times table: faulty mathematics will not build good bridges; faulty medicine will not save lives; faulty history will not enlighten us about the past; and faulty English will ultimately corrupt us. Each discipline has its own Greenwich time, its own standard of weights and measures by which performance must be judged even though the knowledge which helps define the discipline changes over time. Students — men and women alike, of whatever creed or color, caste or class — should be master of what their diploma professes them to be. Faculty above all, enjoying the primary authority that their understanding of a subject matter gives them, are, in the end, responsible for maintaining that ultimate standard.

A denatured subject is a denatured standard. No slippery slides get us faster to soggy academic bottom than inflated grades and slackening teaching. Both are betrayals of our charge. The one deludes our students into thinking they know more than they do and sends them forth poorly prepared. The other denies them their true inheritance, an understanding and possession of disciplined work and authentic quality.

At the University of Utah, we are now entering the class average alongside every letter grade on a student's transcript as a measure of how hard or soft the student's grade is in relationship to the average grade earned by all students in that particular course. We are also limiting honors at graduation to a maximum of 25% of the graduates. Students above the 90th percentile will graduate magna cum laude. Those in the 75th to 90th will graduate cum laude. The various colleges on campus have been asked to establish academically related criteria for determining these limits during an interim two years. Thereafter, students will accumulate "Honors Points" under a formula designed to add comparative excellence as a factor in awarding graduation honors. The remedy, we hope, is more than semantic.

In our compassion for students, we sometimes confuse personal growth and academic progress in our evaluations. The "inward journey," personal growth, is, let us hope, the inevitable accompaniment of education, but it is largely ineffable. Academic progress can and must be measured, judged by standards appropriate to the discipline. We want both personal growth and academic progress. We want compassion and humanity in our students and in ourselves. No supply of it from us toward them or from them toward themselves, however, will take the place of knowledge — any more than that knowledge, once mastered, can save us without grace and wisdom in the use of it.

I have been talking about justice as applied to standards and I seem to have repudiated mercy. Not so. There is a place for mercy, as much as there is for justice. Mercy, as applied to standards, has to do with the acknowledge-

ment that people learn at different rates and come to us unevenly prepared. Surely there must be a means of investing in their potential as we do in the better prepared. These are the late starters, the overworked, the disadvantaged, the handicapped, the wavering and undecided, the slumbering and the reborn in our society. We must find a more enlightened way of enabling them, not by circumventing but by honoring those standards, to arrive at the same plateau of achievement, though by possibly different routes and schedules. Existing institutional and governmental programs tend too often to generalize the problem and coerce the solution. The present arrangement, therefore, tends to be dysfunctional for students and faculty alike. Justice motivates and rewards; mercy nourishes and enables. If in admissions we can afford mercy, then at graduation we must insist on justice. Let opportunity be as open as the means of the country, the community, and the institution allow. Let the process be merciful, but let there be no compromise in the product.

It will not do to homogenize either the students, the curriculum, or the distinctive attributes and purposes of our diverse and pluralistic system of higher education as we seek our solution. This is the tendency both in the expressions of governmental interest in our internal affairs and in the rise of state systems of higher education with their accompanying bureaucracies. We are a pluralistic society but one nation, and educational policy must take both our unity and diversity into account.

Standards are a moving target in relation to rising costs and uncertain appropriations and indeed to changing purposes and values, the changing purposes and values being often dictated by the bottom dollar. O policy, thy name is budget! Standards are inseparable from purpose and the willingness to fund the programs which translate purpose into action. To do well what we are able to do within the limits of our resources seems to be a far preferable policy than one which would extend our institutions and programs, in consideration of custom or entrenched interest, to the point where we find the entire enterprise on the thin edge of its capability.

Standards are a moving target influenced by what Martin Trow has called the transition from mass to universal higher education, that is, the present expectation on the part of most college-age persons that one form or another of post-secondary education will engage a portion of their life and experience. Thus, the range of interests and the variety of motivations and purposes that animate the student body and, therefore, impinge upon the established conventions of the higher learning, cannot help but materially influence the idea as well as the administration of standards. The influx of the older and more mature student will further complicate the problem. If the number of voluntary students enrolled in our colleges and universities has increased, so too has the number of involuntary students. The latter are in attendance, but uncommitted, seemingly unable to connect a further education with their own futures. Perhaps more often than we are generally willing to acknowledge, there is no such link, and we should bring ourselves more readily to the point of accepting that fact even if not more cheerfully.

Standards are a moving target in relation to what Trow describes as the autonomous versus the popular functions of colleges and universities. The autonomous functions cast the university in its traditional role of creating, preserving, and transmitting knowledge, the "high culture." It is elitist. The

popular functions, more common in the United States, see the university in a service role. It is social and egalitarian. "The line between them," says Trow, "is not hard and fast: . . . all university activities are in some sense responsive to societal interests." The first suggests privilege; the second, rights for all. "Higher education," he says, "is assuming an increasingly important role in placing people in the occupational structure and, thus, in determining their adult class positions and life chances."

Obviously each function must be guided by appropriate standards. There can be an academic division of labor between and within institutions, suggesting that standards, depending on the nature of the institution and its role, are best defined within the context of clearly articulated institutional purposes. A system of post-secondary education that does not distinguish in its funding and expectations between and among community, vocational, four-year colleges, and universities, however, is a bed of Procrustes. Given the means, institutions and systems can and do adapt. In a time of change, they need to construct programs and procedures that work, like those floating piers that rise and fall with the tide but to which we can safely anchor and deliver cargo and passengers.

The buffeting with which our institutions are presently obliged to contend is a function primarily of the changes to which reference has already been earlier made, some of which flow to us from the outside and some of which are quite of our own doing. Our response, as the theme of this conference implies, has, as to our institutions' essential standards and inner life, been less certain and convincing than one might have hoped. Have our reactions to these changes and pressures on educational standards not really been more tentative and unsure than those with which we ourselves are comfortable? Has this not been so at least in general?

It is true that the higher learning is afflicted with seemingly unforgiving fiscal problems. The reasons are many and complex: inflation; competing social programs in the public sector; disenchantment with research; and student unrest in the 1960s and early 1970s, which contributed so significantly to the startling loss of confidence in the entire enterprise we call higher education. Thus, "Taxpayers, legislators and private donors," as Lord Eric Ashby has reported, "want universities to demonstrate (i) that they can govern themselves in reasonable tranquility; (ii) that they are being run efficiently. . . ; and (iii) that they can restore a consensus about a 'unifying set of purposes — purposes that the supporting public can understand and defer to.'"

It should be obvious that no unifying set of purposes can be conceptualized, much less administered or agreed to, in the absence of clearly understood and articulated ideas about educational standards. The issue is unavoidable. That is not to say that our colleges and universities must seek and secure for themselves a common standard or one undifferentiated by the diverse character and pluralistic nature of higher education in this country. It is rather to suggest that each institution look to itself for the formulation of educational standards, compatible with its own *raison d'être* and within the encompassing purposes that have both sustained and given meaning to the idea of the higher learning in western civilization. This conference should help us all, each and every one. Thank you for the privilege of sharing it with you.