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General Education in the Two Year College—Is It Meeting the Needs of the Student and Society?

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(Transcript of an extemporaneous talk.)

In an increasingly complex and pluralistic program of higher education, the various institutions which make up the complex must be able to change in response to the changes in society. Higher education must be evaluated continuously and altered in its objectives to reflect both the needs of the students as well as the needs of society.

The problems seemingly become more complex due to many variables, but in particular to:

1. The rapid growth in numbers of students.
2. The increasing heterogeneity of the students.
3. The growth of new subject material.
4. The changes in our values.
5. The influx of minority groups.
6. The move towards universal higher education for all who desire such an opportunity.
7. The development of new learning methods.
8. The non-traditional granting of credit and the external degree.
10. The financial crunch of the 70's vs, the honeymoon of the 60's through 1968.

It is essential for all of us in higher education to see these complexities in their totality, and to see higher education in its totality as well. It is essential that we understand the philosophy and objectives of the various types of colleges and universities—both two- and four-year and that each type has equal status with the others. There can be no status continuum—each has its own responsibilities to the youth and adults to be served and each must then be held so accountable. The Community College can no more be cast in the image of the university than can the public state college be cast in the image of the selective private liberal arts college. The pluralism of our institutions is absolutely essential if we are to serve our pluralistic students and their pluralistic needs.

So also must all of our faculty members, administrators, board members and state officials—also federal officials—be aware of and support the belief in the need for pluralistic leadership from all of the aforementioned groups. Input from each group will create a maturity and richness of effort which will be reflected in the ability of us to cope with the severity of the problems facing higher education in the 70's and perhaps on into the 80's—a period of time Clark Kerr calls the Present Dark Ages of Higher Education, somewhat comparable to the fifty year period from 1820-1870. The present period started in 1968. I believe it will not continue beyond 1975-76 provided we believe in the pluralism of leadership rather than in the unilateral-vested interest power plays put on by one or more of the involved groups. There is too much at stake to afford such luxuries as we have observed in the past, be the actions those of boards, faculties, administrators, students, or external pressure groups within or out of government. Higher Education is under attack for our lack of leadership in responding to our responsibilities. We are increasingly, as a totality, going to be held accountable and if we can't answer our critics through our actions—we will be regimented through legislative and executive action. This is already being done in several locations—as you well know.

There are other pluralisms we must keep in mind:
1. The pluralism of teaching methods to provide our heterogenous students with opportunities to learn and to achieve—rather than to simply become disillusioned and to fail. Any teacher can destroy through boredom and lack of personal interest those students who lack confidence but still have a semblance of hope. We are enrolling more and more of these “first generation” students. What are we doing to motivate them, to create confidence and self-respect in them—to obtain our rewards through their achievement. Are we
encouraging and participating in Research and Development as it relates to better teaching—better learning methods, better understanding of our students; where they come from—what their hopes are—what their weaknesses are—what we as educators must do instead of using the lecture-chalk talk method which was used when the college student bodies were more homogeneous through the accepted methods of elitist selectivity. More than 50% of our high school graduates now go on to college—and it may become 80% by 1980—not the 2% of past generations.

2. The pluralism of financial support with increased interest and action by the federal government—not in lieu of but in addition to: Student Aid, Institutional Aid, Facility Aid, Research Aid (In Teaching).

3. The pluralism of awards which include both degrees and certificates. Intermediate awards to take care of the stop-out—the stop and go student who will continue his education for many years—hopefully throughout his active life. He cannot afford to become obsolete in thought in our changing society no more than society can afford his obsolescence. He should be encouraged to continue and be given suitable recognitions.

This is really all preface to the topic of my presentation but is necessary for an understanding of the topic. As we plan for the permanency of rapid change in our society, we who are the so-called leaders in higher education must learn to cope with these societal convolutions. The community colleges enroll the broadest spectrum of our society—therefore in such colleges the problems of general education are the most difficult. If we believe in general education as an integral part of a higher education program, we must recognize and deal with the following:

1. The rapidity of change in science and technology—described as a doubling of knowledge every ten years.
2. The growth of automation and its impact upon our lives.
3. The complexities and drastic changes in our very foundations of life—political, societal, cultural, religious, economic and intellectual.
4. The realization that a lack of education stifles achievement—the “West” is gone—saleable skills have replaced raw strength and desire.
5. The conflicts within our philosophies and within life itself are with us as related to idealism and pragmatism, intellectualism and anti-intellectualism, materialism and anti-materialism, self development and selflessness, revolution and status quo, nobilism and absolutism. Confusion reigns—cynicism lurks, bigotry flourishes and a desire for the simplistic solution is almost all pervasive—and it could lead to 1984.
Therefore there is a growing realization of an urgent need for well informed, mature thinking, responsible citizens who both think and produce and who are concerned with tomorrow—not just today. No nation will or can continue to exist on a philosophy of "new"—"anything goes"—"I'm not responsible for my actions so exonerate me"—"give me amnesty." Evidence of changes toward productive contributions to society is emerging and thus hope for the future is more real today than yesterday, but no return to apathy can ever be condoned. What is needed is a creative tension—a divine discontent—which will result in positive actions for improvement of society—for an understanding of what could be and is possible for all of mankind.

General education in the two year colleges is not meeting the needs of the student and society. It is far too often mired down in the traditional approaches of the university. We don't comprehend the interests and needs of our pluralistic student bodies. We are too obsessed with what the university says is acceptable to them—by course title—class credit and course content. English Literature—History of Western Civilization—Introduction to course after course. These were sufficient yesterday—but today isn't yesterday. Egalitarianism in the community colleges has superseded meritocracy. The open door and open access and universal higher education has superseded the selectivity processes. Higher education is an entirely different thing and we have to adjust with vision and realism. We need to look and listen, to evaluate and discuss, to seek input from all sources and to be aware that there will be agonizing reappraisals of what was in terms of what must be.

The community college must not be concerned with how many enrollees complete one or two years—with how many graduate with an A.A. degree or go on and graduate with an A.B. degree. We must rather be concerned that the students while enrolled learn to achieve—learn to appreciate—learn to be concerned—learn to differentiate between fact and fiction—between the rational and the irrational—learn to recognize the bigot, the phony, the con man—learn to appreciate the builder—the man of integrity—to separate the facts from the fantasies.

This is what general education is all about—and our students are anxiously awaiting our leadership—our confidence rather than our cynicism—our beliefs rather than our disbeliefs—desiring a foundation from which to grow rather than a swampland built on criticisms, negations, sarcasm and non-belief in almost everything. Why are we educators so willing to smirk forth our cynicisms and destroy? Why can't we instead present the fact—argue for solutions and remain positive even in the climate of despair at times. It is our role to build people—not to destroy their very hopes and foundation beliefs.

What should a general education program be?
1. Understanding the problems of rapid change upon our society—future shock if you will.
2. Understanding the convulsions of the inner cities and the despair of the inhabitants.
3. Understanding the barrenness of the suburbs limited to the culture of the “Tube” and the shopping center.
4. Understanding the rudiments of anthropology and sociology.
5. Understanding the excitement of creativity as exemplified in the humanities and science.
6. Understanding the scope of education and the knowledge that this excitement can and should continue throughout one’s active life.
7. Understanding the self and its relationship to other selves—brotherhood, respect and love—not hostility, antagonism and hate—and then putting our understanding into action.

General education cannot be force-fed—it must relate to the interests and needs of people. It must be pluralistic in availability—it must be relevant for today, and through the vision of educators must evolve into the needed relevancy for tomorrow.

Our motto might well be—

Each person’s growth, culturally and socially as well as occupationally, enriches each one of us personally and enriches society as a whole.

The broadly educated person through his and our efforts, both formally and informally, creates a richer social and cultural climate. We in higher education must be and will be held so accountable in today’s world and in the histories still to be written.

It is truly an exciting time to be a part of higher education. The challenges are before us, clear and visible. They are being broadcast daily by people from all segments of our society. What more do we need in order to take action in providing educational leadership—it’s long overdue.

The Carnegie Commission reports, the Newman reports, the State studies, the regional studies, the local studies, the institutional studies all tend to say the same thing. Higher education is a totality and as a totality must take the necessary actions in concert, public and private, two-year and four-year, Boards, faculty, administrators so that the pluralisms I have mentioned can be achieved for the betterment of society as a whole, as well as for the growth of the individual.