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Exclusion and Records: Another Threat to General Education

Raymond L. Chambers

Abstract: This paper is a brief examination of some of the arguments for and against two common practices in academia: excluding students who fail to maintain some minimum standard of progress and noting that failure on the student's record. It is concluded that the arguments in favor of both procedures are inherently wrong-headed: dangerous to both education and the larger society. A response to the unenlightened general public and their legislators, exclusion and therefore its notation should be eliminated. Instead a more fluid, timeless process of education should be developed. Students should be expected to master material, but not on a time schedule.

Biases: The Nature and Purposes of General and Liberal Education

The assumption here is that general and liberal education is a desirable activity. General Education means that every person who wants to have a stab at education should be allowed to do so. Liberal in this context then refers to the notion that everyone should be exposed to a breadth of courses to assure some appreciation of humanness. This notion runs counter to the trend of the last 20 plus years that students should be specialized automatons. With modifications, general and liberal education parallels the English system, the products of which may discourse on Shakespeare and the meaning of life regardless of whether they head banks or build them.

The marriage of general and liberal with as large a segment of the population as possible is a desirable event. The failure to encourage the development of humans out of everyone produces a dangerous vicious cycle. A mindless, unthinking, emotional rabble so feared by the founding fathers, without the sensitivity to understand the complexities of life, could very
easily be captured by a demagogue. There are those, for example, who would point to the recent experience of Richard Nixon as an indication of what can happen if education of the public falls short. This rabble could then be enslaved in a miserable political and/or economic situation that may lead either to despair and dejection as in the Appalachians or to revolution, violence, crime as in the cities. We know, for example, that juvenile delinquents are characteristically fatalistic. They feel as if nothing they do can change their life . . . they are inherently bad people. Yet education can and does allow people to pull themselves out of their existences. That idea, after all, was the basis for public support of education and the strivings of the "baby boom" parents who wanted their kids to have "what I didn't." It is not surprising, then, that areas with the lowest levels of education also tend to have the highest crime rates — both officially reported and empirically observed. That is not to say, of course, that merely forcing people to stay in school will reduce crime. The rise in crime tended to parallel the increase in the number of high school graduates. Simultaneously, though, the number of those who (1) could read and write, (2) could think creatively, and (3) wanted to read, write and think creatively declined. The "express yourself" schools of the 1950's and 1960's failed in that students were not expected to learn a broad spectrum of ideas about the human condition of others as well as themselves. That is, they did not receive a liberal education — one that presupposes the need to be able to read and write.

Assuming that these observations are correct, more or less, and that the public schools will make little if any effort at changing themselves — the teachers, after all, were taught by the schools of the 1950's and 60's — then some organization must step in to correct, as much as possible, this situation. That organization at present is the college-university. If the objective of general and liberal education is to be met, then five conscious objectives must be adopted:

1. Colleges should admit any warm body that appears at their doors. This is especially true for universities if they are seriously interested in a universal education for their students and for the general public.

2. The appropriate people, faculties, special instructors or divisions, administrators must assume that most people are improvable if not perfectable. Of course present techniques, interdisciplinary approaches, knowledge, etc., may not be sufficient for the task. Therefore,

3. One must have faith in the potential of the human mind. This faith must be multifaceted. That is, one must believe that the student's mind has potential. But even in the face of obvious incapability, one must have faith also in the minds of the teachers and the researchers. For their work may rebound to help the incapable student. Thus,

4. Colleges and teachers must be willing to work with students as long as necessary or until the student gives up or until the student's or the state's money simply dries up. Do not let them get away! What if, two months after you give up on the student, a new technique is reported that might have helped that student survive, improve his life, improve society . . . Might, that is, if you still had him. And what is he doing now???

5. Even if persons simply cannot be improved for whatever reason, they are still valuable people to keep around.
a) Perhaps by keeping them, you make them “safe” — remove the possibility of them reverting to the street.
b) You also have ready-made subjects for study and experimentation with new techniques.
c) And you do save money since they are off the street.

The Threat to General and Liberal Education

These proposals are anathema to large segments of the general public, government, and even academia. There is an ever increasing desire for “exclusivity,” “excellence,” and the notion that “not everybody was meant for college.”

There are a number of reasons why people want to make education less general and probably less liberal as well. For one thing, there is general disillusionment with the power of education. People expected to walk out of college with the certainty of a “better” job. Yet the job market, the increasing number of graduates, the increasing number who “squeeked through” probably because institutions had too few resources to identify those in need and help them, resulted in the absurd condition of being “over qualified” for the available jobs. That such a development should occur is the result also of an inadequate educational system. Clearly, businessmen with their own high levels of education failed to learn that having a good mind at the bottom can help just as much as having one at the top.

At the same time as the college experience seemed to be failing to do its job — provide better jobs — it also became increasingly expensive. Thus, it appeared to be costing more to do less.

Third, there has developed a cohort of academic “bums” who use taxpayers’ money in the form of VA benefits, Basic Grants, National Defense Student Loans, and who do not attend class or who fail to repay the loans. Disgust with “bums,” increasing cost, and rising unemployment would certainly seem to lead to taxpayer resistance to general education.

Finally, education itself is a source of this threat. Not only has it failed to teach the businessmen about the value of the human mind at all levels of the corporate structure, but it has failed to clearly establish its mission. Not surprisingly, then, even large numbers of faculty members join in criticizing open admissions and indefinite careers in college. Few consciously see their role as being any higher than vocational training (including of college teachers). What more need to realize is that colleges must strive to broaden the minds of as many people as possible. They must be taught to think creatively, to respond to new circumstances as they arise, to adapt. The jobs will follow.

One word of caution regarding this recommendation. To create, it is first necessary to have something with which to create. Thus, the effort should not be directed to the kinds of experimental instruction that characterized the public schools of the 1950’s and 60’s. Rather all levels of education should strive to transmit the basics not only of reading and writing but also of each individual discipline. Furthermore, understanding of each basic, how it fits with the others, why it is important, will help the student to develop the necessary creativity, adaptability.

Instead, however, the trend has been to strike back at what has been seen as abuses. Instead of opening doors wider, many schools have resorted to limited enrollments. State governments have reduced either the support or the increases in support to colleges forcing larger classes and cutbacks in faculty
and students. And a third weapon in this arsenal of attack on general and liberal education is the revived interest in exclusion-suspension-probation.

The Nature and Purpose of Exclusion

Exclusionary systems found in most colleges usually involve a system of warning a student that he or she is in academic difficulty and then booting him or her out if there is no demonstrable "satisfactory academic progress." Frequently, students may be readmitted after varying periods of time on the assumption that enforced penitence will suddenly produce either a genius or a more self-controlled individual less inclined to "goofing off." "Satisfactory academic progress" is usually determined by computing a grade point average on the basis of a number of credit hours attempted. The system may be more or less arbitrary. Some schools simply sever a student's academic neck automatically. Others offer systems of recommendations, counselings, appeals, etc. At least one even permits a committee of faculty members to overrule the system at least for a short period of time. Few, if any, exclusion systems take into account where the student started (an "F" student who suddenly starts making "D's" is still not making "satisfactory progress"), the variability of grading systems, and the relationship the student had to the teacher and the material.

There are a number of reasons for exclusionary systems. For one thing, schools can advertise their "standards." This quality permits them to (falsely) suggest by implication that they are good schools, the best students should go to them, and that they are virtually assured of a fantastic job upon graduation since they are so highly regarded — they have such high standards.

Second, exclusion is an automatic, painless way to remove the academic "bums." These are the people who are probably on some form of assistance and just simply do not show up to class. Chances are they either collect their checks and run or spend their time in the pool room or bleeding the suckers over poker. Since failure to show up and/or take tests means that they also fail, they are very quickly eliminated and sent back to the very places where they learned to rip off the system.

Third, "defective" students, those "who just don't have it," but who insist on coming to class and re-enrolling and who may or may not be on some form of assistance, are a real bother. First, they take up a faculty member's time which could be more profitably devoted to the brighter students. Together they may do some significant research. The bright student will get an even better education and go on to great heights him or herself. Furthermore, most faculty probably wouldn't know how to help a slower student and don't want to be bothered when there are so many other more interesting, challenging, rewarding, and less frustrating things to do. Clearly, "defective" students unfairly take away from the education of the brighter students.

But even further, they also take up space. And in specialized schools that refuse to increase their staffs and facilities in order to artificially increase the shortage of their graduates, the presence of "defective" students means that qualified students are turned away. This "problem" has occurred in recent years in response to efforts — generally poorly facilitated — to improve the lot of the poorly prepared minority students who want to be doctors, lawyers, etc. Of course, the solution is simple. Increase the number of seats available. Try telling that to the MD's and lawyers!

The Opposition to Exclusion

In spite of the "rationale" of exclusion, there are a number of objections to
the procedure. Broadly speaking, these counterarguments can be divided into two groups: those responding to the reasons for exclusion and those addressing larger issues concerning the effects of seeking "excellence" in college student bodies.

The Irrationality of Exclusion

The "rationale" utilized by supporters of exclusion actually appears to be quite irrational. For example, the argument regarding "standards" immediately confuses and elevates a very local phenomenon. On what basis is a determination of exclusion made? The answer is, of course, grades. And who determines the grades? Again the answer is obvious: teachers. Thus, the "standards" are established in the classroom. It is doubtful, now that college facilities are so readily available across the country, that employers consider the "reputation" of the entire school. What they look at is the student's individual record. A student with consistently good grades is given a second look. A student with poor grades is encouraged (unless a minority) to go elsewhere. So why indulge in overkill?

If a student finds reward in the college experience yet consistently flunks, then college is doing its job: an accurate (possibly) record of academic progress coupled with a humane concern with the benefit of all who are interested.

The other two arguments for exclusion reflect a clearly irrational gut reaction. The "bum," for example, is the student who is so unimpressed with education — and perhaps his teachers in particular — that he uses his aid check to finance his extra-curricular activities while not attending or "learning." How insulting!

If someone doesn't appreciate what underpaid teachers are doing, he deserves to be cut away from the fold. Besides, these "bums" are just ripping off the taxpayer.

But as with most gut reactions, the effects of allowing the "bums" to remain are ignored. First, where else are these people likely to go? More than likely the only other place for them is the street. At least for the few hours they are in the student center-union they are separated from their old colleagues. Second, what else are these students to do once they are kicked out? If they are (by definition) on some form of aid, the odds are very high that they will revert to two twice-as-costly practices: welfare and crime. Not only do both cost money, but the latter actually endangers the life and happiness of all citizens including the teachers and administrators who excluded him/her.

More importantly, however, is the revolutionary idea that as long as the "bum" stays in the student center-union he/she will eventually become a "real" student. Political scientists are well aware of the inability of the classroom experience to affect norms, values, attitudes. Anytime a conscious, blatant or subtle attempt is made to influence students, post-test measurements fail to record any change. There are a number of reasons for this performance, of course, and few agree as to whether peer groups are more important than parents, than TV, etc. But many teachers are certain that a peer group is certainly more influential than they are. If so, a likely impact of allowing the "bums" to remain is to constantly expose them to peers who first may stimulate interest by discussion of what went on in class and then may shame the "bum" by finding him/her to be "out of it." That is, the "bum" may find him/herself losing friends as they progress into new interests and he/she doesn't. The long-range effect? Well, if we'd just give him/her a chance, possibly a new and real student.

Then, of course, there was the argument about the "defective" student taking up time and space that could be made available to those who could
make productive use of a college experience. The point is well taken. Yet there is a conflict between the needs of the “better” students and regular faculties and the needs of the country for an educated population and the American value of reward for hard work. Should colleges punish hard work by excluding those who may with time be salvageable? Should colleges send out people to enter the work and political world who are inadequately prepared to deal with these new pressures? Can there be any other option? The answer to at least the last question is yes. What is clearly needed is an expansion of educational facilities, staffs, opportunities. Special programs for those with some form of learning difficulty or inadequate preparation should be established. Some efforts in this direction have already been made. Boston University’s Basic Studies College represents a courageous leap. The University System of Georgia and some schools in Maine have “Special Studies” programs. Many programs, however, are instituted for the wrong reasons (integration) and with dysfunctional restrictions. Georgia, for example, limits the time a student may stay in Special Studies to one year. There is some confusion as to whether one year means 3 quarters or 12 months. Even so, since faculty members know that one year may not be sufficient to help some of these students, there is a tendency among some to evade the Regents’ limitation through a series of barely hidden tricks.

If special studies faculty are aware of the idiocy of arbitrary time limits since not all students learn at the same rate or start at the same place, why are such limits established? Why is there no coherent effort made to expand education in the face of declining enrollments? Why, in fact, are cut backs planned and/or carried out? The answer is obvious. Few in the public understand that excellence means better education, not more restrictive admissions. Thus, if improvement is to be made, teachers and administrators must go in to the communities regularly and forcefully to educate the public to the necessity of financing more programs of varying natures and enrollments.

The Broader Effects of Exclusion

There are other objections to exclusion. One, just noted, is that “normal academic progress” may not, in fact, be normal. No two students learn at the same rate or start from the same base point. Thus, exclusion is just simply illogical and unfair.

Second, exclusion is intellectually insulting. By excluding students, schools are saying, in effect, that they have no faith in their teachers’ capabilities, the students’ improvability, and the researchers’ ability to confront and solve problems. To say that we have reached the limits of the human mind is to deny the entire history of progress. Every day new developments in medicine are revealed offering hope to thousands, to cite just one example. But colleges are back in the 19th century when the popular conception was that everything had been invented already. Certainly this is a strange position for an institution whose job involves the study and improvement of the human mind.

Third, as has been repeatedly suggested, exclusion is simply socially dangerous. A fruitful avenue of research for criminologists may be the association of crime and exclusion. If a student is “smart” enough to graduate high school and get into college and learn the loopholes that permit him to become an academic bum, what kind of criminal is he likely to become if excluded?

Finally, exclusion of those who “just don’t have it” is extremely misleading. The criterion is, of course, grades. But there are a number of factors that
influence grading. The southern student may not understand the words of the northern teacher. Grades themselves are extremely imperfect measures of achievement and vary from teacher to teacher. Then, of course, there is the personality conflict that may develop. Furthermore, in an effort to both advance the chances of the “slower” student and avoid hurting the job chances of students, faculty have tended to give even higher grades to all students. Thus, employers cannot trust schools with exclusion systems since their graduates may, in fact, not be sufficiently well prepared. Those systems with programs designed positively rather than as punishment can now be trusted by employers. Exclusion, then, actually interferes with the integrity of the classroom and encourages the public attack that education has been receiving in recent years!

The Unholy Alliance: Exclusion and Records Offices

Given the evils of exclusion, it is astonishing not only that schools keep exclusionary systems, but that Records Offices are so eager to note on a student’s record that he has been excluded. Not only is such a note educationally unwise, but it is also dangerous to the institution.

For example, suppose that a student “straightens out” and manages to graduate with a fairly respectable grade point average. To an employer or insurance agent, such extreme swings of behavior suggest a tendency toward instability. We know that instability has been a frequent cause of rejection for credit, jobs, insurance. If a student requests release of his record for job or credit purposes and is turned down because of his erratic record (which is frequently a reason why people do not enter graduate school), then the student will have cause for suing the school for violation of the Fair Credit Reporting Act. That is, the simple notation of exclusion without explanation and without a student’s response directly violates the Act. Thus, to be truly accurate, a student’s record should include not only grades and notes about exclusion, but also detailed statements from admission and exclusion committees, extended written statements from the student, and observations from outside sources concerning activities, etc. The cost and complexity of such a system is clearly prohibitive. It would be safer for the school then to simply drop the notation from the record.

That recommendation makes the skin of many registrars crawl. Their argument is that notations of exclusion tend to reflect accurately the student’s career and thereby form an essential part of an historical record. The error here, of course, is that a notation is not a record. As noted above, a truly historical record would be unmanageable for most schools.

Furthermore, an exclusion notation is not an accurate reflection of a student’s career. There are simply too many sources of error which are unaccounted for by a mere notation. Exclusion is based on grades and note has already been made on the unreliability of grades. It does not, additionally, take into account the nature of the school. Some students, upon transferring, discover they improve their performances. There is additionally the problem of being smarter than the teacher. The popular story has it that Einstein was “excluded,” for example. How absurd! And what about home life situations, inadequate preparation, learning disabilities that are treatable, etc., etc. All of these are ignored by the notation EXCLUDED: (date).

Is a notation on a record really that important? Apparently so. A recent survey of 46 state coordinating bodies and 57 other individual schools, conducted by the author, revealed that only 20 schools (including one state
system) either purge their records or do not note exclusion at all. For most, not only are such notations important, but they will affect transferability as the response from Brigham Young University indicates:

You should be aware that it is our feeling that student records should reflect an objective, precise record of what the student has attempted, and should not be purged or changed in such a way that transfer institutions would be unable to make their own evaluation of the student’s record or performance. Knowing that your college has this kind of system would jeopardize students’ admission and scholarship opportunities if they transferred from Bainbridge to BYU.

At least one school, then, will use a socially undesirable, unreliable, erratic, unfair, misleading technique to unjustly penalize a possible transfer student. The collusion of records offices and exclusion, then, represents an insidious development that is inherently wrong and dangerous.

Conclusions

Extended beyond the limits of this discussion, the long range effects of exclusion, when combined with other factors, may produce the following:

1. The trend toward “standards,” “excellence” will yield a greater drive for exclusion.
2. That in turn will logically lead to a push to eliminate “special” programs.
3. That will reduce the percentage of “educated” in the population and increase the percentage of those barely functional.
4. That will increase the drive for professionalism already manifested in the slightly reduced general education requirements reported in a recent CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION.
5. The end result will be a mass of poorly prepared and a minority of over-specialized privileged.
6. This situation could then result in demogogic leadership, an end to democracy, and a potential for violence and crime.

Admittedly, there is nothing inherent in exclusion and records that would produce such catastrophic developments. Exclusion, and its puppet, the records office, is merely a symptom of a larger unfortunate situation. If general and liberal education is to survive, all faculty and administrators must strive to re-educate the general American public to the real purpose of education and the need for that objective.