

# Creative Planning in the Four-Year College

**Creating a sound yet flexible program for its students is a continuing responsibility of the modern four-year undergraduate college.**

**O**PTIMISM regarding the future of higher education in America is hard to sustain under present circumstances. The now familiar statistics and predictions regarding increases in the demands for post-secondary school education and training, considered together with the relative paucity of present or foreseeable resources to meet these demands, give cause for concern if not for alarm. Yet there is also cause for hope in the current situation. The times are so demanding of change that colleges may find it possible to break from those patterns of the past which are obsolete; to rethink and re-shape programs of undergraduate education along more effective and educationally sounder lines. Courageous and imaginative leadership can utilize the current threat of deterioration in collegiate education as an unusual opportunity for long-range improvements.

To call attention to the need for creative curriculum planning and development in American four-year undergraduate colleges is not to overlook or belittle the many efforts which have been and are being made to improve that segment of higher education in our country. But we live in a world of rapidly accelerating change and it is reasonable to say that present attempts to prepare for the known, let alone the unknown, future

of higher education are seriously inadequate.

That American collegiate education will change is a certainty. That it will change for the better is a matter of question. There is little chance that our colleges and universities can *successfully* "muddle through" the next ten or fifteen years. The maintenance and enhancement of quality in higher education will depend upon the extent to which changes are the result of careful and intelligent planning rather than the products of expedient adjustment to irresistible pressures.

Sound curriculum planning, even under the most ideal circumstances, is a difficult process. Experience has shown that the continuing and cooperative efforts of all persons involved in the educational situation are essential to successful curriculum development. The difficulty of establishing conditions that make such efforts possible at the college level is not a new problem. The administrative demands made upon presidents and deans and the competing interests and responsibilities of faculty members have served in the past to keep both these groups from giving adequate attention to basic educational problems. As Carmichael has pointed out,

... the matter of the direction of educa-

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tional change has fallen between two stools with the result that it has been determined largely by pressure rather than by planning, by outside influence rather than by statesmanship. The great need is for educators to become masters in their household with a view to reversing the process.<sup>1</sup>

Reversing this process becomes increasingly urgent as the forces which make it more difficult grow steadily stronger. Fortunate is the college whose administrators and faculty members recognize the need to accept and actively engage in the development of educational policies for the future and whose personnel have the maturity which permits them to be comfortable in the presence of change. Creating an environment where change can and will be accepted by the individuals who are affected by such change is one of the most difficult tasks of the college curriculum worker. In this regard, it seems likely that the question of whether there is time to change people before other elements of the educational situation are changed will be one of the most difficult procedural problems demanding the attention of curriculum planners in the years immediately ahead. In addition, the problem of finding the time, the energy and the resources to do an adequate job of planning for change will require unusual measures for its solution.

Curriculum revision and curriculum planning of a limited sort are time-honored and time-consuming activities familiar to every faculty member. How-

<sup>1</sup> Oliver C. Carmichael, "Major Strengths and Weaknesses in American Higher Education," *Association of American Colleges Bulletin*, May 1953, p. 241-42.

ever, if the college curriculum continues to be thought of as merely the pattern of courses which a student must successfully complete in order to graduate, there is little reason to believe that more curriculum planning, regardless of how "creative" it may be, will have any appreciable effect on the quality of learning in American colleges. Only as we conceive of the curriculum as encompassing the total college experience of the student and direct our efforts toward an understanding and enrichment of that experience will we be able to take advantage of the opportunities for positive change in the present situation. An understanding and acceptance of learning as a process rather than a quantitatively measurable product will be necessary before improvement in the quality of learning and instruction can be achieved. Attention to the total atmosphere of the institution and its influence on student experience must replace preoccupation with the reordering and renumbering of courses, the reshuffling of prerequisites and credit requirements, and the refurbishing of grading systems and the multitude of artificial motivators which have lost whatever questionable validity they ever had. It is time we should turn our efforts to discovering what really happens to students—what is meaningful to them—during their college experience. With this knowledge educators will be in a position to reshape programs so they will contribute more adequately to the purposes of college education.

### For Continuing Self-Education

That purposes will continue to vary in their specifics from institution to institution is to be expected and encouraged. The needs and desires of both students and society will be too broad and varied for any single formulation of college ob-

jectives to direct all four-year undergraduate programs. But whether or not an institution has any unique professional or vocational overtones, it must continue to accept responsibility for providing an environment in which emerging young adults are stimulated to discover themselves and the world about them. Students must be encouraged to grapple with their own and the world's problems, and to develop the personal strengths and the understandings, skills and concerns which will enable them to continue their efforts for personal and social improvement. Without this commitment to the pervasive purposes of general or liberal education, any college will fail to fulfill its unique role in our system of higher education.

The preparation of students for continuing self-education is probably the most important objective of college experience. Creative planning for the future achievement of this goal requires a critical examination of certain aspects of traditional collegiate education. Particular attention must be given to information - disseminating, course - attending, credit-awarding, grade-rewarding, degree-granting procedures. Does the present program result in an institutional atmosphere which values independent and critical thought and gives open recognition to the pursuit of expanding knowledge, or does the program promote conformity, stultify student thought and confine student experience within rigid and narrow limits? It is time to test widely the hypothesis that a pattern of individualized, flexible and more informal education will result in more rapidly maturing students.

Already many colleges have initiated programs designed to test the feasibility of self-education through independent reading and study, work experience,

travel, community service and informal discussions. Some colleges are making provisions for the inclusion of students in curriculum planning and development programs. These arrangements provide immediate steps toward the goal of developing student initiative and responsibility as well as assist the college toward realistic solutions to its curriculum problems. If these innovations in higher education prove successful, they will do much to alleviate the pressing problems brought by increasing enrollments as well as to improve the quality of college education. At the same time if we really are to view the student as the center of our concern in higher education, we must treat cautiously and carefully any tendency to solve the problems of increased enrollment by substituting mechanical devices for teachers. The personal sensitivity of teachers and the contribution of close student-teacher relationships are likely to remain essential elements in effective collegiate education.

Considering the above, it is well to remind ourselves that positive and lasting change is more likely to result from innovations if they are truly experimental. "Demonstrations" are not apt to provide a solid or valid basis for lasting change. This is not the time for riding bandwagons. Proposed changes must be based upon clear and explicit rationale derived from our understanding of how students learn and must be subjected to a critical evaluation in terms of the goals we seek. In these trying times it will be dangerously easy to fall into the error of rationalizing changes which will ease our burdens but fail to move students toward their goals. We must guard especially against being pressured into changes which are based primarily upon economic rather than educational considerations. The misuse of the scientific

method and the tendency to allow novel and attractive means to determine the ends of education are becoming all too frequent. Indifference and inaction in the face of today's problems will be dangerous, but inattention to the aims of collegiate education will be fatal.

The planning of programs which will promote and utilize self-directed education must give careful consideration to the motivation of students. If such programs are to use the real motives of students rather than those which are artificially created, these real motives must be adequately identified and understood. In addition students must be helped to understand their own motivation and be directed into activities which will provide the satisfaction and experience needed to expand and deepen their interests and concerns. At present there is some disposition to base programs of self-directed learning in higher education on the "sink or swim" doctrine. In view of the fact that the past educational experience of beginning college students usually has not prepared them to accept responsibility for their own learning, the "sink or swim" approach appears to be generally indefensible. In this instance, as well as in others, it will be important for college personnel to articulate col-

legiate policies and programs with those of the secondary schools from which the students come. Unfortunately, innovations at the secondary school level which were designed and initiated originally to provide high school pupils with the foundation upon which to build an increasingly self-directed education have been fairly thoroughly discredited as too "progressive" and as anti-intellectual—in many cases by the same college educators who now would welcome freshmen who possess maturity and motivation rather than a full slate of course prerequisites and an exemplary high school average. Nevertheless, the creativeness of much of the curriculum work in secondary education contains many useful suggestions for college curriculum development.

In the final analysis, the improvement of the quality of learning and instruction must be the criterion against which curriculum development is assessed. Such improvement will be effected by those who teach, for in the college as in the elementary and secondary school, the curriculum is only as good as the teacher. Our ultimate hope lies here. Higher education in our society has been, is now, and will be in the hands of dedicated, sensitive and courageous people.

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