

WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT THE CARNEGIE UNIT?

NORMAN K. HAMILTON

Assistant Superintendent, Instruction
Public Schools, Portland, Oregon

THE Standard Unit, commonly known as the "Carnegie" Unit, was named for the Foundation which financed a study of higher education. The "Unit" was an innovation of educators at the turn of the century in an attempt to break the inflexibility of the traditional "classical" or "general" educational programs in the secondary schools of that day. It was also devised to provide a common language for interpreting to institutions of higher education the experiences of secondary school students, and thus supply a definition of what constituted a college or university in terms of its admission requirements.

There is no doubt that the Standard Unit has exerted a profound, although controversial, influence on secondary education. Opposing views have been evident for some time concerning the "Unit." It has been described as providing secondary schools with wide options in the selection of content of programs for students with the only constant requirement being the time variable. At the same time, the "Unit" has been blamed as a deterrent to educational innovation by forcing schools to equate educational experiences with time spent in class, penalizing bright, self-directive students who need less class time and more unscheduled time, and fostering the notion that getting credits is the central purpose of education.

Whatever position one takes on the subject, the use of the Standard Unit has been a popular and persistent practice in secondary education. All six national accrediting associations within the boundaries of the United States adopted it, and there is no appreciable difference between the Standard Unit of 1907 and of 1965. With only a few exceptions, units are interpreted as from 120 to 145 sixty-minute hours of classroom time per subject.

Problems Related to the Unit

While one stated purpose of the Standard Unit may have been to free schools from the tradition of earlier days, it has gathered around it a new set of traditions

which dominate course structure and allotment of time in most high schools to this day. Further, the "Unit" provides some secondary school leaders with the luxury of doing nothing about modifying educational programs, and this at a crucial time when secondary schools need to develop more comprehensive and diversified programs.

Only a few serious attempts have been made to evaluate or modify the practice of using the Standard Unit in secondary school standards. Rather, the Unit is accepted almost complacently by those who are not interested in the innovation of new secondary programs and practically ignored by those who are. Recent attention in secondary education has been focused mainly on subject content, new teaching arrangements, and more subject offerings, to meet a broader range of student ability.

The massive, national curriculum reform programs, for example, have accepted the present secondary school organizational patterns. The "new" sciences, mathematics, and other programs that have been developed are organized to be taught for a specific number of hours per year and in classes of uniform size, with little concern for the interrelationships among subjects. They have brought new content, subject by subject, into our schools, but the fragmentation of the curriculum as a whole remains. Thus, the progress in these efforts is limited to the objectives of each separate subject.

Only a few school leaders who are experimenting with team teaching and other teaching arrangements are bothering to go through the formality of getting permission from their accrediting associations for innovations, though most associations (some reluctantly) make provisions for experimental deviations. Most experimental schools are equating student experiences in the so-called flexible programs with the traditional Standard Units. In such programs, hours are still counted in time spent for study of a subject whether in large groups, in small groups, independent research, or teacher conferences—practices inconsistent with the Standard Unit definition. Those few school leaders who have initiated new teaching arrangements simply work around the obstacle of the Standard Unit with the tacit acceptance of most accrediting agencies.

Deterrents to Modification

The broadening of curricular offerings has also been within the general framework of Standard Units. The effort that has been put into providing more courses for a range of ability from the highly gifted to the disadvantaged and under-achieving youth has aimed at providing subject sequences in which each student, regardless of ability level, can achieve and maintain some degree of competence in the major areas of learning. Patterns of seminars have been developed for the bright, while practical English, fundamental science, and general mathematics are provided for the less well endowed. Such efforts are commendable but they illustrate again that the Standard Unit confines development of programs to separate subjects. The Units of credit earned describe very little about secondary educational experiences for any particular individual. All students, regardless of

their course sequence, receive some kind of standard units of credit toward school completion.

Secondary schools in America will be slow in eliminating the practice of using Standard Units. Institutions by their very nature are designed to perpetuate their goals. Procedures are built into the institutions and are hard to change even though such procedures may have outlived their major purposes. The use of the Standard Unit has been a convenient recording system of time spent in courses; it has brought security to administrators and too much uniformity to secondary school practices throughout the United States; it has made scheduling easy; and it has provided a handy measuring stick for regional and state accreditation. Along with these mechanical aspects, it has also allegedly provided an element of objectivity and adaptability in secondary programs by allowing course content to change while subject time allotment remained constant.

There have been several fruitless searches for something to replace the Standard Unit. One proposal for modification has been another way to count time not as whole credits but as parts by breaking a unit into sections; e.g., .4 of a unit; 1.5 units, etc. Another suggestion has been equivalency tests with credit provided for those students who reach a certain level of competence regardless of the time spent in class, a practice now accepted to some degree by universities.

There is a genuine fear on the part of many that modification of the Standard Unit might be replaced with something worse. An alternative, they point out, might emerge as a qualitative measurement of programs, resulting in a rigid system of standard tests. The more qualitative the evaluation, the greater number of value judgments will have to be made. It is argued that value judgments may seem flexible to those who make them, but it is rare, indeed, that large groups of any society will regard a value judgment made by one group as sound for all. Thus, as one looks at the possibility of qualitative evaluation, the question arises—who shall make such judgments? Value judgments can tend to become as tradition-bound and non-yielding to changing needs as time blocks.

Perhaps the greatest mistake that has been made is that of trying to perpetuate a unit counting system under a new plan. There will surely come a time when the Standard Unit will cease to exist as an important feature in determining secondary educational practices. There are already signs of this.

A greatly overestimated deterrent to the elimination of the Standard Unit is concern for college admissions. Many secondary schools plan their programs with college admissions in mind and measure their success by the number of graduates who are admitted to a university or college. Related to this issue is an honest concern of many educational leaders for protection of the traditional American value of equal opportunity for any late developing student who might be able to gain admission to some college sometime in the future, if he has amassed a prescribed number of units for high school completion.

Yet practically no colleges, with the possible exception of some community colleges, today accept a high school diploma as the sole criterion for admission. Directors of college admissions now are more interested in College Board scores,

rank in class, cumulative grade points, and teacher recommendations than they are in the actual number of hours spent in studying any particular subject.

Need for a New Viewpoint

The Standard Unit may have served some kind of purpose in its day. It is becoming evident, however, that the Standard Unit describes very little about the secondary school experiences of an individual and predicts nothing. Colleges are becoming less concerned with unit counting, and schools that wish to innovate new practices seem to find ways of getting around the Unit. Certainly the Standard Unit contributes nothing to the development of creative approaches and provides no guidance for educational improvement. With these things in mind, it is evident that educational groups should forget the Unit and focus their attention on providing freedom and supportive guidance to local school leadership.

As local school leadership becomes stronger through better preparation of administrators and as teachers become more competent, their needs will be best met by criteria which give them new insight and which serve to elicit creative endeavors. The attention of staff members should be directed to the underlying purposes of secondary education and the revitalization of their programs through constant processes of reevaluation of their efforts to improve their schools. They should be spending time in looking at programs as a whole instead of segments of programs and their concern should be for continuous educational progress of each student. This will include growth in personal and social adequacy, growth in understanding the nature of the learning process, and competency in appropriate subject fields.

Recording and reporting practices should be descriptive of each student's educational progress and should provide ways of communicating these to others as the student moves from one learning activity to another. It should be the responsibility of each school to devise instruments which will include information about the major areas of learning activity provided for students and their levels of achievement in each area.

A few suggested areas to be considered in devising such techniques might include assessing unique achievements of each student, recording skills that have been learned and used, analyzing skill in using sources for data that have been used in depth study in any of the disciplines, assessing progress in achieving the goals established in each learning situation, and studying attitudes toward self and the educative process. Surely with the modern devices now available for recording, classifying, and transmitting information, such techniques are not beyond possibility. Wise counselors and teachers can use these kinds of information to locate significant events in a student's background which will help him assess his own progress and establish further goals.

When secondary educators concern themselves with these things, the Standard Unit can lie fallow and eventually become a forgotten counting device of a former time.

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