THE COLLEGE AS COMMUNITY

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Freshman Year Experience--West
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INTRODUCTION

When Sandy Astin surveys some 200,000 incoming freshmen every year, he asks: "What is your best guess as to the chances that you will drop out of college permanently?" Every year the answer is the same. Less than one freshman in a hundred expects to leave the institution. but then something happens to this high-minded aspiration. As everyone must know, 50 percent of the students leave the institution and at least 30 percent do not graduate even after seven years. Some students, for the best of reasons, transfer or drop out--planning to return. But all too many drift away from campus because of an absence of "belonging." And this loss of inspiration is not only harmful to the institution but it is tragic in simple human terms as well.

I

In the Carnegie report, College, we conclude that one of the most urgent obligations colleges confront is to build a sense of community--a sense of belonging--at the institution. And for this to be accomplished, colleges and universities must be much more attentive to what happens to the students especially during the first days on compus and throughout the freshman year.

We found during our study that today's colleges are far too casual about inducting students into the enterprise of higher learning. And we conclude that if colleges would be as attentive to students after they enroll as they are during recruitment, that one act alone would enrich dramatically the freshman year.

While preparing our report on College we visited several orientation sessions and it sounded like the students were getting ready for summer camp or a weekend in Bermuda rather than launching a serious intellectual quest.

During campus visits we heard faculty and administrators complain repeatedly about students who, they said, were wholly uninformed about the traditions of college life and who failed to appreciate the value of the liberal arts.

One professional told us: "My students have no idea what scholorship in my department is all about." Probably true! And yet, where in the undergraduate experience are students told about such values? And how are they to appreciate traditions about which they have not heard?

A college junior with whom we spoke had, during the summer months, been hired as a waitress by a major hotel chain in an eastern city. During her first day, in an orientation session, the new recruit was shown a film on the corporation. She toured, with an assistant manager, every department in the facility--from kitchen to housekeeping--and she was told what it meant to be a member of the "hotel family." After telling us this story, the student said she had been given a more exciting and helpful introduction to the hotel than she had to the liberal arts college where she was enrolled.

II

How can we more effectively introduce our students to the community of learning?

I'm convinced that the process actually begins when the student is recruited. It is reflected in the integrity of the message and in our capacity to convey to the student the conviction that the college has a clear and vital mission.

Frankly, I worry that in today's marketing climate students are getting more brochures, but they are, at the same time, less informed. We recommend in the Carnegie report that every college schedule a pre-term session for all new recruits--one that may extend into the first semester.

One Southern college in our study has an orientation program appropriately called "The Bridge." Freshmen meet in small groups with professors to discuss books they have been assigned for summer reading. And, incidentally, "The Bridge" program also has physical fitness sessions in which students plan an exercise program, undergo a physical examination and discuss diet with a health professional on the team.

In the Carnegie report we also urge that all colleges schedule a special orientation convocation at the beginning of the academic year--one that would be as significant for matriculating freshmen as the commencement is for departing seniors. The purpose would be formally to receive the entering class into the community of learning through participation in a shared, symbolic experience.

At Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania each freshman class is received into the institution through a beginning-of-the-year convocation. The student body officers lead the procession--and the service. The faculty march in academic garb and a faculty representative speaks to the freshmen about collegiate life. The upperclassmen and other guests sit at the perimeter, while the seats of honor are reserved for the freshman class in observance of the day of commitment and special celebration.

In our report we further propose that all colleges offer a short-term credit course for new students, entitled perhaps, The College: Its values and Traditions. Such a seminar, while telling students about administrative procedures and extra-curricular life, should pay special attention to the academic tradition of the college and help students understand how scholars carry on their work.

Topics that might be considered include: How or why was the college founded?; What are the traditions?; Why do we have a general education program?; What significant events have shaped the college?; What goals is the college seeking to accomplish?

For years, the University of South Carolina has had an orientation course, called University 101, that focuses on academic life. During this course students consider the purposes of higher education and they are introduced to the university's traditions and procedures. Students who enroll have higher retention rates and become more involved in activities on the campus.

III

In the Carnegie report we conclude, however, that orientation, while essential, is only the beginning. After the "flush" of newness fades, new students soon discover that there are term papers to be written, course requirements to be met, and conflicts between the academic and social life on campus. Students need to talk about these tensions and dilemmas.

A freshman student told one of our reporters; "I call home a lot, especially when I have a big exam. The main thing my mom wants to know is whether I'm eating right and getting lots of sleep, which really doesn't help much since I'm not. But at least I feel better just talking about my worries."

I'm suggesting that the freshman year experience should also include a well-planned program of advising. And yet we found advising to be one of the weakest links in the undergraduate experience. Emergency services, such as health clinics, are found on most campuses, but only about one-third of the colleges in our study had a quality advisement program that helped students think carefully about their academic options.

One student, at a college with no formal advisement structure, told us: "At registration time I couldn't get much help around here. So I finally decided to talk things over with my roommate."

When we asked students in our national survey how they felt about the quality of advising services on their campus, we learned that at least half the students had never sought advice

on financial, vocational or personal matters. And only one in five (20 percent) had ever sought advice on academic matters!

And on many campuses the faculty are not actively involved. To what extent should faculty members be personal as well as intellectual monitors to their students? Is it the caring Mr. Chips or is it the stern, detached, law professor characterized by John Houseman in the Paper Chase who embodies the ideal relationship between faculty and students?

During our study when we asked students directly about faculty influence, about one in four said there is not even one professor on their campus who takes a personal interest in their academic progress. As to nonacademic matters, less than 40 percent of the students said there are professors at their college to whom they feel free to turn on personal concerns--this was down from 53 percent in 1976.

Especially revealing, and perhaps most disturbing, is the fact that almost half the undergraduates (48 percent) in our survey said they felt that students at their college are treated like numbers in a book. But we found a sharp difference between the public and private institutions and also between the liberal arts colleges, where only 9 percent agreed, and the research universities, where 62 percent of the respondents said students are treated like numbers in a book.

In the Carnegie report we strongly urge that all institutions, large and small, plan a comprehensive program of counselling and advising throughout the freshman year.

Wichita State University has a comprehensive advising program for all incoming students that has dramatically reduced attrition, and Miami University in Ohio has a successful program called "The Freshman Year." Entering freshmen at Miami attend a summer orientation program at which faculty members from each of the academic divisions advise and register incoming students. A freshman adviser lives in each residence hall. Since it is not necessary for students to make an appointment or wait for office hours, their questions can be addressed as they occur. Miami, by staying in close touch with students and by taking advising into residence halls--which are small communities--has an impressive retention rate, one well above the national average.

IV

Beyond orientation and advising there is, of course, the academic program.

We found that the freshman year general education requirements are something students want to "get out of the way" so they can get on with the academic major. Indeed, when we asked students if they would support more general education at their college, 71 percent said they would support more computer science. About 50 percent said they would approve of more math and English, but history, literature, foreign language and the rest were resisted by the vast majority of students.

We conclude in the Carnegie report that general education should be something more than a grab bag of electives. During orientation, students should be told the mission of general education at the institution. The required courses should be given top priority on the campus and senior teachers should be actively involved. Frankly, it's hard to expect students to be enthusiastic about general education when faculty themselves are not supportive of the program.

Lewis Thomas said on one occasion that: "If this century does not slip forever through our fingers it will be because education will have directed us away from our splintered dumbness and will have helped us focus on our common goals."

This is, I believe, the goal of common learning. Discipline must become a means to a larger end.

V

This leads to Observation number four.

I'm convinced that beyond orientation and advising and a core of common learning, there must be good communication on the campus. Faculty, administrators, and students must speak and listen carefully to each other.

The early Quakers, as you all must have heard by now, often would risk imprisonment and even death because of their unwillingness to "swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God." Part of their objection was to "swearing," but they also objected to the fact that they were being asked to swear to tell the truth. This, they felt, is surely something that should be assumed. We should be bound to honesty at all times, they argued, not just when we assemble in a court of justice.

Without getting sentimental I am suggesting that, during the freshman year, students should discover that a college community must also be held together by this assumption of honesty and truth. Integrity is essential not just in teaching and research but in human interaction, too.

Wayne Booth of the University of Chicago wrote on one occasion that, all too often, our efforts to speak and listen seem to be vicious cycles spiraling down. But Booth went on to say that we have all experienced moments when the spiral moves upward; when one party's efforts to speak and listen a little bit better produced a similar response, making it possible to try a

bit harder and on up the spiral to moments of genuine understanding.

I have a less elegant, more personal, illustration to present. When I was named Chancellor of the State University of New York, I was often confronted with intense rage by angry, frustrated students. Time and time again, my talks were interrupted. I was held hostage and given non-negotiable demands. To this day, I occasionally glance toward the door to see if the students will move in. Time and time again, deep down inside, I drifted between feelings of anger and fear and, time and time again, I bit my tongue to keep from shouting back. There were meetings when I did not communicate effectively and when the situation only worsened.

But in thinking about this conference on the freshman year, I recalled one occasion when something seemed to work. I was at Binghamton, New York, and I'd just begun to speak to faculty gathered from across the state. The Board of Trustees was in attendance. It was high drama. Just then--as if on signal--350 students moved in through the swinging doors with placards and chanting slogans. They demanded that I free a group of students who had been arrested on the Buffalo campus for breaking and entering the president's office the night before. The microphone was grabbed, and for almost an hour we went back and forth. Finally, I concluded that we were not communicating; the meeting was in shambles. (Why it took me sixty minutes to discover that reality I'll never know. Slow learners are always with us.) Even worse, I concluded, and this I think is the crucial point, I

was talking not to people but to a faceless mob. I left the platform and walked into the crowd. I began talking with a single student. I asked her name; I asked about her family; I asked her why she was so angry. Soon several others joined us. I described how I truly felt and what I could and could not do.

To make the story short, that session ended. A compromise was reached, and in the process I'd learned to know some most attractive students.

I'm suggesting that the quality of the freshman year is to be measured by the quality of the communication encountered by the student, by the capacity of all members of the community to speak and listen with clarity and conviction.

IV

Finally, if the freshman year is to succeed, students--early on--must be introduced not just to the academic and social life on campus but to service, too.

John Gardner wrote on one occasion that the deepest threat to the integrity of a community is an incapacity on the part of the citizens to lend themselves to any common purpose.

Several years ago, the Carnegie Foundation released a report on high schools in the United States. During that study I concluded that we not only have a school problem, but we also have a youth problem in this nation. Many young people feel alienated and adrift--unconnected to the larger world. Today it's possible for high school and even college students to graduate and never be asked to participate responsibly in life; never be encouraged to spend time with older people; never help a child who has not learned to read. And there is a growing gap in our culture between the generations--a dangerous division between the old and young. Older people spend their declining years in retirement villages, while the young are isolated in youth ghettos on the campus.

I'm convinced that for a college community to thrive students must see a relationship between what they learn and how they live. And not only develop competence, but commitment, too. It means reaching out to others.

Vachel Lindsay wrote on one occasion: "It is the world's one crime, its babes grow dull; not that they sow, but that they

seldom reap; not that they serve, but have no God to serve; not that they die, but that they die like sheep. The tragedy of life is not death. The tragedy is to die with commitments undefined, with convictions undeclared, with service unfulfilled.

And students, during the freshman year, must be given opportunities to become actively engaged.

CONCLUSION

I return then to the basic theme of our report.

The goal of collegiate education is not only to serve individuals but to build community and to help students see connections.

When the observant Frenchman, Alexis de Tocqueville, visited the United States in the 1830's, he warned that: "As indivdualism grows, people forget their ancestors and form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine their whole destiny is in their hands."

To counter this cultural disintegration de Tocqueville argued that citizens must turn from the private interests and occassionally take a look at something other than themselves.

I'm suggesting that if we can renew the freshman year a strong learning community will result. And perhaps it is not too much to hope that the college--as vital communtiy of learning--can be a model for society at large; a society where private and public purposes also must be joined.