The Importance of People

Column Editor: Fred T. Wilhelms

Silk Purses Out of Raw Silk

"NOWADAYS, when I hear the term 'high standards,'" Howard Lane said recently, "I know it probably means *more systematic rejection.*"

And we do almost seem to be in a national campaign for exclusiveness. It comes to a head at the college level. Something less than joy shows on the citizen's face when he hears of huge college enrollments just around the corner. Plain dismay greets the probable budget. State institutions search for legal ways to narrow the entry gates—with most of their faculties applauding each new success. Private institutions, freer to do as they like, make such claims for the students they finally admit that sometimes their faculties and facilities look a little shabby by comparison.

The high schools and grade schools can't block out whole layers of the population, though, humanly enough, they sometimes sound as if they itch to. But they can manage an internal exclusiveness, in classes and activities and general school life, which pretty effectively saves the special goodies for the insiders.

Well, I'm not out to make all that look silly or nasty. It *is* a distressing thing at any level to have to teach the incompetent, the shiftless, and the hostile. We *do* have to ensure rich opportunity for those who use it especially well. And it *is* essential that colleges spend their resources on those who can and will do collegiate work.

Still, there are some questions: Like, will a policy of exclusiveness get us enough highly developed people? We tend to act as if it will, as if letting more youngsters finish high school or enter college is just a kindness to them. At the same time, we worry about shortages—of doctors, of teachers, of scientists, etc.—and there may be a wee contradiction there. When we look ahead we see a society and an economy even more complex, even more dependent on technology. And we usually say there will be still less need for the untrained and a still greater demand for college graduates.

It's a tricky business, this forecasting of manpower needs, and I can't pretend to have the answers. Yet I have a feeling in my bones that our society is going to miss becoming what it could be in just whatever degree we let potential ability go undeveloped. If that isn't true, if a narrow-gated educational policy will get us all the leaders and scholars and technicians we need, then maybe my concern is groundless. Maybe we can afford to be a little cavalier; maybe we should refuse to stoop to make silk purses out of anything that doesn't

look nice and silky right from the start.

But suppose it turns out we need more silk purses than we get that way, what then? The old saying tells us we can't make them out of sows' ears. What can we use?

Let's look at the Russians. They may be more worth studying in this particular than in anything else they have done. When their great revolution was finished, they had wiped out the old aristocracy, shot much of the intelligentsia, and liquidated the small middle class. As they launched their massive program of education, nearly all they had to work with were children of an ignorant proletariat, or peasant boys and girls reared in mud huts by illiterates. To an orthodox schoolmaster they must have looked like a prize collection of sows' ears. But the event has proved that they weren't sows' ears at all; they were only silk in a raw, hard-to-recognize form. They must have been, for out of their ranks have come the scholars and the scientists and technicians who are challenging the Western World.

A Search for Silk

If I could qualify, I should like to be on the faculty of a college that deliberately and experimentally set out to discover and develop outstanding talent from among the unprepossessing. I realize that we are not so hard pressed as the Russians were, because for three centuries we have been bringing up into the middle and upper classes millions who, in less venturesome societies, would have ground out their lives in the lowest class. By doing so—and our schools have been among the prime movers—we have tremendously enriched our store of ready human resources.

Yet in that very act we have proved that we have only begun, that there is a vast added store of human richness waiting to be brought up. We need it—need it so badly that it is folly not to make the visionary try. Our problem is *not* to ease the looming tax burden by selecting more cautiously. Our problem is to find ways of investing ever more daringly; to invest in every kind of ability we need, searching it out wherever it may be. All experience has proved that the great investment will pay; bold bets on human beings always pay.

But let's get back to my new college: It will have extremely high standards; far higher than those of most of our universities where, despite all the talk, just reasonably able youngsters get along pretty well if they are socially and verbally developed. For we shall be seeking out the truly exceptional from a very large reservoir.

That search will constitute our first great problem. The ordinary ways of looking won't identify the young men and women we are after. In fact, the ones we want may look very bad through the eyes of a typical admissions officer. For instance, their English won't be very attractive, at least as to polish; and finish in English is an important college criterion—necessarily so, college being a wordy business. In addition to its real importance in intellectual matters, quality of expression tends to be a major symptom of a much larger syndrome of social factors. Thus it is hard for a college not to be blinded to real quality when speech and writing are poor. Perhaps we can learn to spot, underneath the crude sloppiness learned in rough homes and street corners, that naive strength and clarity which betoken a good mind.

The admissions officer looks, again necessarily, for intelligence. He may not

see it in our students, for we know that the group-test I.Q.'s on their records are likely to be 15, 20, or even 30 points below their real ability (a difference big enough to make a bright lad look dull-average, or a genius just reasonably bright). Inevitably, the same sort of result is registered on the test of academic aptitude which the college itself probably uses. And so a second set of data adds to our inability to see real quality. Well administered individual tests would come closer to the real picture; and if we are serious about digging for genuine intelligence, we can find ways of assessing it—by inference from behavior in activities and on the job, for instance. But the assessment we need will never be so easy as the mass-administered half-hour.

Above all, the admissions officer looks for grades. For a whole congeries of reasons they may be pretty bad. And so, by just about every standard we college people commonly apply, the very boys and girls I am talking about may look wholly unacceptable. To find them will take a whole new way of seeing. Difficult; not impossible; I saw it being done in Pakistan's Village AID, where perceptive leaders were picking and mobilizing youth of giant potential from a peasantry ignorant beyond your most dismal imagining (while the regular schools and colleges droned on complacently). I saw them using, in tests and in interviews, open-ended questions closely related to the boys' own lives, the answers being rated not so much for correctness as for good sense and inventiveness and evidences of power. I saw them observing foot races and plowing, not for accomplished skill, but for what was revealed about the young person.

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But suppose we have found the ones we want. Our troubles have only begun. For the factors which caused these youngsters to look bad (and, in all truth, to perform badly) by school standards will still be operating. Can we offset those factors? Can we create an environment in which these young people will catch fire, so that four or five years from now they will stand up with the very best—so that, no matter how unorthodox our intermediate treatment, our final product will be no dilute compromise with quality?

It will take years of bold experimenting. Initially, one must make one's guesses, and bet on them. Let's look at just a couple of variables. We know that, compared to the middle and upper classes, the lower-class family lives more for the present; plans less, sacrifices less for the future. This is just one aspect of a value system which the children share. We can expect them to aim at present gratification; to be impatient about putting preparation in the bank toward some vague future.

How can we change this? The question is pivotal. For without a civilized flair for thinking ahead, nobody can invest himself in the grueling processes of disciplined thought. Can we build a program which yields a high measure of immediate satisfaction and at the same time, little by little, shifts the emphasis toward the future? I don't know the answer.

But I do have a hunch that one big reason for a lack of future-orientation is the lower-class youngster's pretty realistic appraisal that for him there isn't much future anyway. A middle-class youngster has real-life opportunities to see that people can move ahead. A slum youngster has a hard time believing it, because the image of life as he

has seen it includes only the long, dusty stretch at one level.

Years ago, when Burton studied sixth graders around Chicago's stockyards, he found that, typically, they had been only six blocks from home; and when he asked them to imagine the better part of Chicago, the highest they could go was to guess that it probably did not smell so! With TV and all, perhaps few are so isolated today; yet the low ceiling on the conception of life may not be atypical. Maybe the main reason a Russian slum boy in 1921 could release the energy to become a scholar was that suddenly life opened out before him. Things were going to be wonderful; everybody was talking about it.

A Value System

Well, improving the conception might not be too tough. Moving upward is always difficult, especially for minority groups, but try to think of a time or place when teachers could more truthfully have sold exceptional young people on the opportunities before them. A clever faculty, not too much shackled by orthodoxy, might be able to build a new picture of life's possibilities and goals.

With the help of home economics, the practical arts, and consumer education, the picture could be tough-minded and realistic, even as the goals moved upward. With a good bit of community exploration—maybe even travel—we could widen horizons. A year or so spent finding out how life is lived on planes of culture and dignity and grace could be a fine investment.

Of course, what we are really talking about here is building up a youngster's value system. On the record, colleges have not generally been very successful at this. But I believe a college could be if it really tried.

A more academic example of the difficulties we shall face can be taken from the field of English. It will be imperative that our youngsters learn to speak and read and write—but above all to think—in the language needed to communicate subtle and complex ideas with precision.

Obviously, there will be the problem of their bad previous habits. But this will vanish swiftly if we solve the problem of motivation. (A powerful mind learns language speedily if there is a drive to do so.) There will be a much worse problem of *meagerness*, the result of poor background. They will need desperately what the liberal arts—perhaps literature above all else—have to offer. Yet they will initially reject all this because they do not see its relevance. We must move with them to very high levels of thought and expression. Yet we shall have to root everything down in what is plainly relevant and functional—this will take creative teaching. But it will not be impossible, if we are willing to substitute a massive effort for the usual mechanical routine dab of "English A," and cut loose our truly creative language arts and literature teachers to use unorthodox content and method.

There will be many other problems. Perhaps the nicest of them all will be to build a campus environment which lets the unpolished feel comfortable enough to be themselves—and yet subtly challenges them to change.

It's of no use for me to try to tell how they will be solved—for nobody knows as yet. The main thing is to *try*. As we make the try we need to enlist the help of the very best social and behavioral scientists. Psychologists can help us to

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furthering the communication arts in secondary school.

Syracuse, New York, City School District. *Aviation Units for the Primary Grades*, (and) *Aviation Units for the Intermediate Grades*. Washington 6, D. C.: National Aviation Education Council, 1025 Connecticut Avenue, N. W., January 1959. 29 and 31 p. respectively. (50¢ each.)

These two sets of units, including one for each grade, were developed by classroom teachers in Syracuse and used for more than three semesters. The National Aviation Education Council valued them so highly that it secured permission to duplicate and distribute the units widely. Various service clubs in the City of Syracuse assisted the project by providing scholarship aid to staff members who attended the Aviation Education Workshops at the Plattsburgh State University Teachers College, where the production of the units was accomplished.

As we enter the Space Age, the interest of youngsters, indeed, their *need* to know and understand basic concepts of aviation is undeniably urgent. The relevancy of such units as these in the modern curriculum is easily established.

Designed as a problems approach, each unit contains background knowledge and fundamental principles, activities for pursuing the problems, materials and resources needed, and many references which are keyed to the elaborate bibliography at the end of each guide. Although the units make their major contribution in the area of science, they include specific suggestions for correlation with all the major subject fields in the elementary school program.

—ARTHUR HOPPE, *associate professor of education, Indiana University, Bloomington.*

People

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understand motivational blocks—largely at the unconscious level—and what to do about them. Sociologists and cultural anthropologists can help us to understand backgrounds of mores and ideals, so that we can blend our work comfortably against theirs. But above all, we'll need to try and fail and adapt and try again.

I guess you see, don't you, that I'm not really talking about a few special institutions—though I do think an experimental college would be worth a great deal. The problem in all institutions *and at all levels* is to learn to identify ability —no matter how it is hidden; and then to create an environment in which youngsters from many sorts of backgrounds can feel at home, get psychologically involved, and start the big push. Even small, half-intentional experience has already shown that campus environment can make a great difference; the downtown city colleges "pick up" thousands who would squirm in red-necked embarrassment on the kind of campus the movies portray.

And the secret of it all is that we need to do only a tiny bit of the whole job. Get an able youngster just a start —a little taste of success—a toe in the door; and you release a vigor and energy that can't be stopped. He will do the rest. Those ignorant village boys picked by Pakistan's Village AID get only a year's training—a year of good food, civilized life, contact with ideas—and they are going out from there to change the face of their nation.

—FRED T. WILHELMS, *professor of education, San Francisco State College, California.*

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