The Policy of Open Admissions

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The decision to open admission to some of our institutions of higher learning is one which will have pervasive effects on the next generation of Americans, the economy and culture of this society, the quality of its sciences as well as its humanities, the extent to which social justice will be realized, and the overall rate of social change. Unlike scores of other decisions we make that are chiefly important in their own right (such as increasing traffic safety), opening the system of higher education to all Americans wishing to enroll in it is not only important in itself but is of far reaching importance for all parts of the societal system. Despite its significance, open admissions and its effects have been little studied; the program itself is poorly understood, and many of the crucial questions about its far reaching implications have not yet been studied. I shall comment here on nine aspects of the policy of open admissions, moving from issues better known to less known ones.

Open admissions or expanded admissions? The term open admissions is misleading; completely open admission to a higher education system has never existed, and it does not exist now. No system of higher education admits all those who belong to the age cohort or even all who would want to attend. Currently, those colleges in the system of higher education that are open, in effect, are undergoing an expansion of the criteria by which individuals are admitted into the system. While the criteria of academic achievement at a particular level are being waived as the basis for admission, there remain other characteristics of the potential student that are unaffected by the removal of the academic requirements. Specifically, economic forces remain as powerful barriers. Even with the open admissions policy, the individuals entering higher education tend to be those who can afford the educational experience—that is, those individuals who can live without incomes for long periods of time and who are not responsible for the support of their families. Even if an educationally disadvantaged student is admitted to a college or university, he or his family must still meet the costs involved, which cover not only his subsistence but also the financial loss to his family that is incurred by his attendance, since he no longer works. In removing the academic barriers, the economic ones appear as yet another set of factors, which limit attendance in institutions of higher learning and thus limit the scope of the open admissions policy.

If we intend to make open admissions truly open, we must affect the basic life conditions of the educationally disadvantaged, not only by removing tuition and fees, but also by providing economic assistance. Although in some parts of the country experiments have been carried out to test the implications of such support, this is not part of the routine program in New York City, New Jersey, or the Midwest (where the oldest open admission schools are located). Until broad economic aid is provided, students from disadvantaged backgrounds will continue to be disadvantaged, and to enroll less and drop out more frequently than other students.

A minority program? Since a genuinely open program of admissions does not exist, it may be more accurate to describe what has been happening as expanding admissions. We come now to one disturbing feature of this policy: the character of the ensuing programs. The tendency has been to view these programs as programs for blacks or other disadvantaged minority groups. In New York City, admissions officers, deans, faculty members, and others connected with the open
admissions programs have consistently described these programs in
ethnically or racially particular terms; for example, courses in Swahili
and soul music were recommended. However, roughly two-thirds of
the students admitted under the new programs are white, many of
them from lower middle class and working class families. Thus, the
program of expanded admissions must take into account not just the
needs of minority groups, but also the needs of the majority of students
admitted.

An expanded program of admissions must reach majority stu-
dents in order to help bring them into the twentieth century educa-
tionally and must offer a relevant curriculum that may help prepare
them for the twenty-first century. It may seem strange that in the last
third of the twentieth century, there are segments of the general
population who have not been exposed to the values that are com-
monplace in the course of a liberal arts education. They especially
lack the experience of seeing the multifaceted aspects of our society;
they have a parochial, limited, and essentially backward view of
society. They constitute one potent force retarding the transformation
of contemporary society into one that is committed to the principles
necessary for just and humane social relations. While the liberal arts
experience is no panacea for the closed mind, it does offer each indi-
vidual in it the opportunity to broaden his outlook. The
expanding admissions policy is recruiting an ever larger number of
students from those groups whose life experiences are not liberating,
but forward looking; it enables the colleges and universities to share
with these students the kinds of insights societal members must possess
if the society is to be innovative and truly committed to the future.

Maintenance of academic standards. A dilemma posed by the
policy of expanded admissions is that of maintaining the existing ac-
demic standards, while academic achievement has been waived as a
criterion of selection. Several leading educators (among them Albert
Bowker, while he still was the Chancellor of the City University of
New York) have stated that no dilution of academic standards would
take place. A similar position has been taken by William F. Birenbaum,
president of Staten Island Community College. He has suggested that
the quality of education has benefitted rather than suffered from the
policy of open admissions. According to him, the literary productions
of the new students, while poor in grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and
style, are extremely rich in emotive materials and life experiences. I am
not suggesting that open admissions has nothing to offer to the quality

of traditional academic experience; it may well enrich higher educa-
tion in the sense of broadening its existential and expressive base. But
as Birenbaum himself admits, there has been a lowering of standards,
unless one values raw experience as more important than command
of the English language.

I find this position untenable on logical grounds. As I see it, the
present form of expanding admissions must result in a dilution of
academic standards. This does not mean that we should not proceed
with the programs or that we must be content with present ways of
judging academic success. As Alexander Astin and others have main-
tained, there are other ways of measuring achievement that may be
more accurate than the ones being used now. Also, one of the prime
functions of any educational system is to take the unprepared indi-
vidual and to attempt to help him catch up with others in the system.
However, it is unrealistic and, in the long run, harmful to assume that
the injection of underprepared students into a student body whose
general achievement is high can have no effect on the standards or
quality of an academic institution. Whether this dilution will continue
or be temporary is a problematic question, which cannot be resolved
on the basis of current experience. What is of prime importance is
that educators and concerned individuals throughout American society
maintain a sense of reality and not close their eyes to the real problems
that result from expanded admissions. Maybe some institutions have
had to do this in order to appease excessively vigilant legislators. I, as
a social scientist concerned with the effects of this program on the
societal level, cannot do so.

One realistic solution to this academic dilemma is the modified
of the traditional features of our educational institutions. Many
students from minority groups fail to do well academically because
the institutions attempt to adapt the student to their standards, while
ignoring the student's particular background and life experiences.
There is no reason why the institutions cannot be made to adapt them-
severs to their students, at least to some extent. However, there are
also wrong ways of adapting. Some would advocate the substitution
of ethnic history courses for mathematics courses, which may prove to be
overly difficult, and some would replace lectures with "rap sessions;"
there are those who advocate completely restructuring the educational
institution so that the educationally disadvantaged will perform better.
Formally, this is one possible solution. If the university is reshaped in
the form most congenial to the disadvantaged students, then their lack
of preparation will not show. However, such a redefinition of the university in the image of the underprepared student carries serious consequences for the rest of the students and does not seem to be truly responsive to the desires or needs of the disadvantaged students themselves.

Most of these students have demanded an adaptation quite different from that demanded by some of the highly vocal advocates of adapting the university to the disadvantaged. As a group, disadvantaged students can be characterized as wanting to be genuinely prepared. The Federal City College in Washington, D.C. is a case in point. There students voted, with their feet, against programs that were set up to be easy, choosing to go into programs that followed traditional academic structure. When they were given the option between a newly devised rap session and a genuine course in history or literature or other academic subjects, the overwhelming majority—more than 80 per cent—chose to take those courses that are academically demanding and that would better prepare them, both as individuals and as professionals, for life and work in American society. The institutions of higher education must respond genuinely to the needs, deficiencies, and talents of the disadvantaged students; they must not offer poor substitutes for the real academic goods to be obtained in these institutions.

Let me assert again that I am not against institutional changes. The educational institutions in many areas need to be much more responsive than they have been. Nor do I believe that every change in the academic curriculum or the method of teaching is—even if it is aimed at the disadvantaged—a dilution of academic standards. Numerous changes may indeed increase the effectiveness and viability of universities. More options should be given to students, and ethnic offerings (such as courses in black studies) are valuable additions to the usual curriculum. Differential certification also gives the whole system much greater elasticity and relevance than it now has. However, the solution to the dilemma of academic quality cannot be found in abolishing academic standards or in providing automatic promotions that pass everyone from grade to grade. The solution does not lie in the “high schoolization” of higher education.

The experiences of schools in Japan and Israel make it possible to predict the reaction of various sectors of our own society if a trend toward dilution of standards were to continue. Industry, government, and other important segments would institute their own certification and selection systems. The certification of the student by the university

or college would carry no weight, and students would be awarded a degree without a societal or economic value.1 Students who had studied for years, would react violently to this waste of their time and effort. If the integrity of our educational institutions is to be maintained and their role of certifying the prepared is to remain, then some standards of quality must exist, and some effort must be made to certify genuine achievement in a field of endeavor. One can remove the colleges' ability to certify, but one cannot remove the society's demand for certification.

Compensatory education. Given that some standards, however revised and adapted, must exist and given the mass entrance of underprepared students into the educational system, some form of compensatory education must be introduced. In reviewing the findings of about 150 different studies of various systems of compensatory education, I have concluded that evaluating the effects and benefits of this approach is an extremely difficult undertaking. No piece of evidence with which I am familiar supports the notion that, by putting disadvantaged students through a few courses, seminars, weekend workshops, or summer sessions, one can remedy the effects of four hundred years of discrimination or of the four or five years that separate disadvantaged students from their academically prepared classmates. One does find in the literature the cases of three students here and eight students there who have benefitted from such programs; however, the main conclusion from the same body of literature points to the need for reaching the disadvantaged student as early in his academic career as possible. If we are to take compensatory education seriously, and that is exactly what I think we should do, we must start early and must continue with the programs on a broad basis during the greater part of the student's academic career. In addition, an effective program of compensatory education must take into account all the relevant characteristics of the individual by combining academic assistance with personal counseling and concern for the student's adjustment within the academic institution. Only if this multiphascd approach is utilized, only if the necessary staff to fulfill the special needs of the underprepared students are trained, and only if we are constantly aware of the complexities involved, may we then move in the direction of providing all students with a viable, effective liberal arts education and profes-

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1 This subject is carefully explored in a report prepared by Murray Milner, Effects of Federal Aid to Higher Education on Social and Educational Inequality. New York: Center for Policy Research, 1970.
sional training. Only through a rich system of compensatory education can we avoid awarding meaningless degrees or promoting the failure of students who find themselves educationally frustrated, thus compounding the already existing stigma.

While much can be done to insure the success of a college program, one must realize that there are often powerful institutional forces that overload the college by transferring too many burdens onto it. Many of our high schools are often miserably behind as educational institutions; they fail in their function, thus retarding the student and passing onto the university a tremendous burden. Kenneth Clark has pointed out that, if higher education is to become workable, the high schools must be made to assume their share of the responsibility. We should all be more active in demanding that they do their job. However, the responsibility does not lie completely with the high schools; future high school teachers are at the moment in our colleges. If we are reluctant to challenge our high school teachers to do their jobs, we are even less willing to ask ourselves why we are not preparing better teachers. If the training of high school teachers is effective, if high schools are improved, and if a realistic and responsible program of compensatory education is instituted in colleges, then we may be able to construct an over-all educational system which will expand rapidly with little loss in quality.

The societal matrix. Even if all the above conditions were met, education is not that fantastic a lever; it cannot redo society on its own. Among the various levers available for societal change, education may well be one of the weakest. Our cultural upbringing in American optimism has tended to make us believe that education can remedy everything that went wrong in a variety of social institutions, from law to economics.

There are many factors in the creation of social injustice that exist in a society, and the extent to which any one program of compensation can remedy this is problematic. We must point out that when a child comes from a neighborhood in which there are few success models, in which the father is unemployed or underemployed, in which the housing does not provide a place to study, and in which the child does not receive adequate medical care, the chances for the effectiveness of education are lowered. As long as these societal conditions persist, the system of education will be unable to perform its function. We are led to ask what else has to be changed in the societal fabric. If we do not ask this question, three or four years from now a new

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Coleman report on open admissions will tell us that the programs have had no discernible effect of educational enrichment on the students involved. Both educators and social scientists must be constantly aware of these other factors in the social fabric and demand that society improve the non-educational conditions of the underprepared, as more education is provided.

Differential admissions. A program of differential admissions would solve the dilemma posed by the expanded admissions program—that is, the problem of admitting underprepared students into institutions with a high ratio of highly prepared students. Differential admissions calls for a new way of thinking about educational experience; presently the thinking is in terms of a zero-sum conception. That is, one is considered to be either in or out of college, either a freshman or a sophomore. I favor a new way of thinking about the college placement. An admission to a college could be fragmented so that a student could be a freshman in English and a sophomore in some other academic field, while not being admitted to mathematics. That is, a student might qualify in some areas and not in others; the completion of one’s studies might take longer than the present four years. If admissions and promotions were broken down into steps by subject area, I believe that the educational system could go a long way toward the desired goal of an effective academic program for students of a variety of achievement levels.

Two or four years? There are two other reforms besides differential admissions in the college system that I would favor. However, I must admit I am not particularly optimistic that these reforms will come about because of the strained financial situation. We must face the fact that for the time being we have a limited amount of public educational resources. We should and must demand that they be rapidly expanded, but the probability of receiving an additional $20 billion next year or of having the resources to double the size of our faculties seems very low. Hence, one must unfortunately order the various innovative programs in some priority ranking. Basically, we must ask: Where should the resources go first? While it is more appealing to say that everything is of the same priority, we must (and in fact we do) make priority decisions. Given the limited amount of resources available, new public funds must be used to support the first two years of higher education, either by supporting junior or community colleges or by supporting the first two years of four-year colleges and universities. Until every young American who wishes can obtain an
able. The dilemma is also faced by the individual student who must decide whether he should seek a liberal arts education, or a professional one. Once one has provided with two years of education, there is no possible grounds to argue that liberal arts should be the focus of our educational system, as the liberal arts curriculum will enrich the rest of their lives, no matter what they decide to do. Liberal arts gives the disadvantaged student a chance to open himself to the central values of our culture, thus enriching and broadening his world view and making this a better society. The other half of me is much more practical. If we will not give disadvantaged students vocational and professional training, then we will be helping to promote a system in which such persons may have more enriched mental lives but still be hungry and unemployed. Along with the enrichment, one must also consider (if one's recommendations are to be realistic) that certain skills are needed that will enable the individual to earn a livelihood in our highly technological society. One of the best ways of reallocating income is to give previously disadvantaged persons a semiprofessional or professional training.

It is easy to say that both should be done; but the educational system cannot do both, especially in view of the limited resources available. The dilemma is also faced by the individual student who must decide whether he is going to take only thirty points of liberal arts and concentrate in the preprofessional curriculum. The educator has the responsibility of providing meaningful liberal arts courses; he must decide whether a course in English literature will be a "snap," a "Mickey Mouse" offering, or whether it will genuinely convey the great cultural ideals. I have no certain answer to this dilemma; however, I would recommend that any commitment to liberal arts or to an applied curriculum must keep the realities of the present situation in mind. Over emphasis of the one to the exclusion of the other could have disastrous consequences, not only for the individual student, but also for the system as a whole.

A new teacher. I would like to close on a more hopeful note about a phenomenon of which I have first-hand knowledge. Our universities are beginning to produce a new generation, which will take the mission of teaching seriously and which will be willing to rethink the traditional emphasis on research as the prime role of the university professor. This new trend has great significance for the policy of open admissions, since the new entrants require a dedicated faculty, willing to work wholeheartedly with the students. If the policy of expanded admissions is to be a success, a new type of university professor will be needed—one more concerned with his students than with his research. I am not saying that every graduate who comes out of every graduate school has this motivation, but I believe there is a new wave of serious social consciousness, which is finding its expression in this new generation of university teachers. Even in such traditionally conservative and research-oriented institutions as the medical schools, one sees increasing concern for the individual and his problems. This new generation could provide junior and community colleges with individuals who want to teach and who do not want to turn these institutions into minor imitations of Princeton, Yale, Harvard, or Columbia.

To further promote teaching we should deal with the complex problem of rewarding the good university teacher. I learned from personal experience how much emphasis is placed on research as opposed to the teacher in colleges. Recently, I was considered for the presidency of one of the colleges with an open admissions program. In the course of my visit with the institution, I was surprised that, at an institution whose main purpose was teaching, the overwhelming ambition of the faculty (at least of those chairmen and professors I met) was to publish. Undue desire to publish is regrettable even in the major research institutions. The unfortunate result of this ambition is to fill academic periodicals and libraries with marginally useful materials.
and to overload the computers and other data retrieval systems. In a college whose main institutional emphasis has been on expanded admissions, this insatiable desire is disastrous, since the prime mission of such an institution and others like it must be teaching. There are difficult problems: how to recognize and reward the good university teacher and how to replace the prestige of research with social honor for the good teacher. However, it seems for the first time that the conditions are favorable for resolving these issues. Our universities are producing graduates who are dedicated to teaching as their prime concern. It is time that we meet them, by finding ways to make teaching (and particularly the teaching of the new students who are coming in now) their first and foremost obligation.