

OPEN ADMISSIONS AND THE DISADVANTAGED TEACHER

Partisans of open admissions find it difficult to know these days whether they are in a rear or a vanguard action. Viewed from the widest perspective, Open Admissions seems inevitable—part of a much vaster shift within and even beyond this society from a rural to an urban population, from an industrial to a service-oriented labor force, from a culture of conformity to one of diversity.

But viewed from a narrower perspective, the perspective of shrinking budgets and growing pessimism about the importance or effectiveness of schools in righting even the educational wrongs of the society, let alone the larger inequities they reflect, Open Admissions seems doomed.

For anyone who has witnessed the success of many young men and women who were taught to fail, has watched them lay claim to their talents, meet their commitments, and set out with a plan in their minds, the widespread pessimism about whether Open Admissions can “work,” as they put it, is baffling. Especially baffling is the fact that this pessimism was deep-rooted even before any of the new students had stepped on our campuses. By now, there is a literature of pessimism, a theology of despair that serves the purposes of those who have already rejected the social policy implicit in Open Admissions.

Unfortunately, the debate about Open Admissions has been and is being carried on in the language of those who oppose it: in the alphabet of numbers, the syntax of print-outs, the transformations of graphs and tables, the language, in particular, of a prestigious group of social scientists who perceive through their language truths that even they seem, at times, unwilling to hear, much as scientists of another kind in another era were led inexorably by the dictates of their language to an atomic arsenal. They are saying, in their language, that schools, when measured by the indicators

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they have selected, affect only marginally the quality of people's lives, and further, that programs designed to help the poor overcome their disadvantages do not succeed. These messages are proliferated through the media and made available to the policy makers, who dip into the reservoir for the numbers they need.

Meanwhile, the two groups who have experienced directly the importance of schools and compensatory education—the students and the teachers—grope for their answers, grapple with words and methodologies they don't understand, experiencing as they do all the frustrations and embarrassments of the person who must say something important in a strange language.

Let me comment upon the disadvantage an Open Admissions writing teacher feels in the face of this arsenal.

There is the feeling of disadvantage itself, the contamination from being perceived as in some way inferior. Thus, too often, writing teachers, sensing that their students' growth as writers cannot be quantified, certainly not in semester segments, perhaps not at all, speak timidly of what is accomplished, or bow to the crude measures of attrition rates, grade-point averages, or objective tests. Unable to describe in the language of the scientists what went on, they often abandon the effort to do so in any language, even the one they have loved enough to study and teach. Or worse, they become easy converts to the new language, vesting it with more authority than the social scientists themselves would claim for it.

What teacher has not felt in those stark lists of behavioral objectives with their insistent parallels—the student will do this, the student will do that—a terrible flattening out of the language and the student in the service of numbers? In how many countless and unconscious ways do we capitulate to the demand for numbers? In how many ways has the mathematical tyranny of the “average” coerced us into moving faster through our lessons than we should in order to “cover the ground,” “meet the standard,” or play the losing game of “catching up.” In how many ways has the need for numbers driven us to violate the language itself, ripping it from the web of discourse in order to count those things that can be caught in the net of numbers. How many young men and women have turned from the wellsprings of their own experiences and ideas to fill in the blanks of our more modest expectations? All in the name of accountability!

But accountability to whom? Not to our students, who come to us so burdened with numbers—IQ's, SAT's, MAT's, etc.—that we can barely see them as individuals. Not to ourselves, who must teach for quick pay-offs that can be translated into numbers so that the ranking and winnowing of human talent can go on apace. Is this our task, then, to prepare

productivity studies for management under the direction of social scientists who are evaluating what they have not studied nor understood? We cannot teach under such constraints; our students cannot learn.

Let me illustrate the insensitivity of numbers with the experience of one student. I'll call her Cora. She came to our college at a time when our writing placement test called for an essay on a person of public significance. (The list of suggestions included the names of some forty men—no women—from many walks and styles of life. Even Pogo was there) Cora chose to write on George Washington, and this is what she said:

George Washinton has contributed much; in making of American History. A general in the army during the American Revolution. He commened many victories; that lead the thirteen colonies to an indepenent United States. Later became the First President of the United States. His picture is shown on the one dollar Bill and twenty-five cent picence (quart). Parks, Streets, cities, People and plases are named after this great leader. Mr. Washington was an outdoorsman in the very sence of word. He loved horse back riding and hunting. It has been said, "he cut down a cherry tree." Making his home in Virgina with his wife Martha.

Three years later, in another testing situation, she wrote this passage:

Many Americans believe that Puerto Rico is fortunate to be exempted from paying taxes. What most Americans do not know is that the tax exemption is not for Puerto Ricans but for the American investors. The Industrial Incentives Act of 1947, continued even after the commonwealth came into being. It authorized and incouraged private firms (American) to invest in Puerto Rico. This Act was enacted to supply jobs and hopefully raise the Island's economy. At first the idea was good; however, as time passed the Puerto Ricans received the short end of the stick.

Between those two passages lies a story, not a sum. To be sure, the reduction of her error count is impressive, but chances are an evaluator would not have taken the measure of her writing improvement, even on this surface level, from her writing but from an objective test, which she would probably have failed because of her allergy to blanks. At the end of four years, her grade-point average was not impressive because her first two years carried the record of her struggle to survive in academia. And finally, because she decided after four years of running between part-time jobs and classrooms, to get a full-time job and finish up her remaining requirements at night, she is probably entered now as an attrition number in the short memory of some computer. But where in the electronic labyrinth of that machine can I enter this bit: that one day, during her

fourth year in college, Cora came into my office, sat down by my desk, and said, "You know something. . . . I'm smart."

If, as I suggest, Open Admissions has reached out beyond traditional sources for its students, bringing into our campuses young men and women whose perceptions of themselves, whose needs and interests and styles of learning differ from those of the students we built our colleges around, and if the social scientists, ignoring these differences, continue to evaluate the performance of the new students with across-the-board statistics based on old criteria, then it falls upon us to formulate the new criteria ourselves. We must begin to keep our own books, recording in systematic ways our observations of our students' growth over significant developmental periods. We must organize our energies around important questions that bear upon the ways we teach, questions about the nature of error and its relationship to linguistic growth, about the schedules of institutions versus the imperatives of learning, about the costs and complexities of code shifting within the academy, about the very nature of the act of writing, with its power to intimidate or free.

As English teachers, we have fallen into prescriptive habits over the years that inhibit us as observers. My record of Cora's development as a student, for example, is sketchy—a list of her grades in English, a few class papers, some placement scores. Little more. No one who had her as a student kept a teaching log or thought to note the stations of her progress. Perspective and product-minded, we ignored the data that were generated by her development as a writer. Looking back, I recall that she went through many crises that are now blurred in my memory, as are the conferences we had where I was more the learner than she. We have been trained to notice what students learn, not how they learn it, to observe what they do to writing, not what writing does to them.

But until we can describe more precisely than we have the process whereby our students move toward maturity as readers and writers, we cannot challenge those critics who claim that the students do not move at all. The boundaries of our accountability thus lie far beyond the behavioral objectives we are now tacking on to old textbooks. They commit us to close systematic observations over extended periods, to a pooling of our research energies and resources, and finally, to a search within the social sciences themselves for techniques of observation and evaluation and for researchers who will help us see what our students are learning. For wherever numbers can become a measure that informs qualitative judgment without dominating it, we should welcome numbers. And wherever analytical modes such as the case history offer us an alternative to statistical averages or norms, we should welcome research. For we still

know too little about the young men and women who are turning our colleges around.

When the first year of Open Admissions was over at City College, I wrote a short report in which I concluded that the presence of the new students challenged the entire college, much as, in Pascal's law, "pressure applied to a confined fluid at any point is transmitted through the fluid in all directions undiminished." Now, at the end of our third year of Open Admissions, we see the results of that pressure in the imaginative work of many of our teachers and administrators in the City University, in the new programs that are taking root in our colleges, despite our financial woes, in the beginning explorations, through research and study, of new territories that now appear related to the teaching of English, and, most important of all, in the questions we are trying to formulate about traditional conceptions of knowledge.

Open Admissions began as a remedial wing to a few departments on traditional college campuses, but it is now transforming the colleges themselves, exposing far more than the deficiencies of the new students. By probing into the nature of those deficiencies and resisting those who have tried to isolate the phenomenon of disadvantage from the society that caused it, Open Admissions is forcing the real question—not how many people society is willing to salvage, but how much this society is willing to pay to salvage itself.

The answer to that question is not yet in. Until it is, the issue of accountability is wide open.