Critical Issues of Student Life: Statement of the Trustee Ad hoc Academic Planning Committee on Student Life

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Statement of the Trustee ad hoc Academic Planning Committee on STUDENT LIFE

February, 1980

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Trustee ad hoc Academic Planning Committee
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9/15/79
INTRODUCTION

Early in 1979, Francis Brown, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, proposed a major study of student life to "examine the role of and review the services provided to students at the University of Maine." During the Spring, while Trustees considered the scope of such a study, Chancellor Patrick McCarthy asked the staff to research the past five years of national studies, monographs, texts and periodicals affecting student affairs. McCarthy stated that the quality of academic life on each campus is directly tied to such vital concerns as degree program balance, support services, tuition and fees, transferability and campus environment.

The ad hoc Academic Planning Committee on Student Life appointed in August included student representatives from every campus plus four Trustees, four faculty and two student affairs administrators. Chaired by Trustee Alan Elkins, M.D., the Committee met in September to review the extensive body of material that had been compiled. Early in the deliberations the members prepared a list of more than 70 topics relevant to student life. They sought data from each campus on such items as counseling, health services, student affairs budgets, and organization. During the Fall, the members debated the strengths and weaknesses of student life programs. It was decided to hold public forums at which students and others in the campus community could talk directly to the Committee about the major issues.
This issues paper summarizes our preliminary discussion. By design, it raises more questions than it answers. It is presented to stimulate reaction from students, faculty and staff. Members of the Trustee Committee will attend the meetings. We will consider your response when determining what recommendations will be included in a final report to the Board of Trustees in April.

The Committee actively seeks interaction, for its charge is to develop ideas and recommendations to support and strengthen student academic life in all its forms. Over the past ten years the Board of Trustees has often discussed specific student life activities but this study is the first attempt to look at the total relationship of students to and with the University of Maine. The effort can be successful only if the campus community, and in particular the students, participate actively.

SECTION ONE:

The organization of this issues paper began when the Committee first discussed the 70 topics in what seemed like three natural divisions - administrative, personal/social and academic services. It soon became apparent, however, that many major issues cut through all three of these divisions. For this reason, we selected eight major issues in student life at the University of Maine: access, relationships among campuses, expectations, pressure, dropping out, involvement in decision-making, nontraditional students, and university vs "real" world. Some of these issues have been of long-standing concern to the University, while others emerged during
the seventies as top priorities. A third area includes issues which will be central to the changing campus environment of the nineteen-eighties. We have placed the eight issues, therefore, in what seemed to be a logical chronological order.

Trustee policy already exists for the problems of access and relationships among campuses. Much thought and energy have been channeled into these problems since they first became apparent in the late sixties, but more still needs to be done about them.

A. ACCESS

Improved access continues to be a major goal of the University of Maine. We must, however, reconcile the desire for equal access with the concern for maintaining standards and quality. At the time the university campuses were merged in 1968, a commitment was made to reducing programmatic, financial and geographic barriers to access. This commitment must be renewed in the changed environment of the early nineteen-eighties.

Admission and orientation of nontraditional students is a topic of concern for some. Is information readily available? Are traditional admissions procedures and criteria applicable to adult learners? In addition, the area of remediation needs exploration: should remedial courses count for academic credit? Open admissions necessarily involves expenditures for remediation and increased academic counseling. Are the campuses prepared to budget for this? Although there is at present a need for remediation by many students, the university must not make a permanent commitment to remediation as college-level work.
Another topic is open admissions. Are students given a realistic picture of their potential for success? On the other hand, we must not rule out the possibility that a student with an uneven academic record can make dramatic progress, given the right campus environment.

What about access for the handicapped? Will the campuses apportion funds to address this issue as well? There are a growing number of federal and state regulations which call for compliance. If there is a need for help in planning for compliance, students involved might provide suggestions.

What about financial barriers? Some students perceive the attitude of financial aid officers as "cynical." Staff, on the other hand, respond that some students want to be "spoon-fed." Are we meeting our obligation to students adequately? The complex body of current financial-aid information should be readily available to students, but it is also important to let students make some financial decisions for themselves.

B. RELATIONSHIPS AMONG CAMPUSES

Another issue which has evoked considerable debate since the creation of the University's seven-campus system is that of the relationship among the campuses. Given the realization that every campus is different, are there basic student services that ought to be common to all? Equity among campuses is an important objective, but it must be approached intelligently and realistically.
A second problem in the relationship among campuses is that of transfer. Since the campuses are different, the transitions involved are often complicated and difficult. What can be done about this? Are there accurate guidelines for the transfer process? Is there adequate transfer counseling/advising? Should a common course numbering proposal be considered? Or would this only aggravate the difficulties? Similar course descriptions and numbers imply similar course content, but these implications are sometimes misleading.

On campuses with several two-year and four-year programs, there is also a problem of intra-campus transfer. Do students lose time when they switch from one college to another? Should colleges work to make their core requirements more similar? These questions also need to be explored.

Improving relationships among colleges and campuses continues to be a top priority at the University of Maine.

SECTION TWO:

In addition to the long-standing very specific problems of access, equity and transfer, there are some more general, pervasive questions which have begun to trouble students at all campuses of the University in the past decade. These questions are being raised at universities across the country, but need to be answered with specific proposals geared to the needs of students in the State of Maine.
A. EXPECTATIONS

Some students appear to feel that their university experience is not living up to their expectations. This may be the result of inflated or inaccurate perceptions of what education should be. On the other hand, some student complaints may reveal substantive problems.

"Disappointed expectations" complaints range from "false advertising" in catalogs to lack of warning about tripling in dormitories. Students have voiced concern about academic offerings, course requirements, majors, electives, class size and hours. Increasing competition for students has opened new doors for many, but open admissions programs without necessary backup services may mislead some students to expect that they can perform successfully on campus.

A major area of misunderstanding, as discussed by the Committee, is in student-faculty relations. Students complain of faculty who advertise office hours which they do not keep, and of advisors who do not really "advise," but simply sign cards. The subject of faculty evaluations by students illuminates the gulf between student and faculty expectations: are faculty out of touch with reality in what they expect from students? Are students aware of what they are expected to do in the courses? Does the syllabus really spell out what a course will entail?
Conflict over expectations sometimes leads to student grievances. Each campus has in place formal procedures to assure fair treatment, but there are complaints that while the student expects a true "second look" at his or her problem, the grievance procedure is in fact simply a formality.

There is a need for more communication between students and faculty on all campuses to narrow the gap between expectation and reality. Expectations as well as programs may need some modification.

B. PRESSURE AND RESPONSE TO PRESSURE

University students across the nation are facing more pressures than ever before: from adjustments to leaving home to competition for grades; from being a single parent and worrying over high rents to roommate assignments and dormitory crowding. Whether traditional or nontraditional, students have financial concerns and worry about the future.

These pressures reveal themselves in various ways, including alcohol abuse, which is a major concern on all campuses. What are the reasons for and solutions to the alcohol problem? Destruction of property, particularly in residence halls, also seems to be on the rise. Should residence halls consider contractual arrangements with students similar to those of other landlord-tenant relationships?

Campuses try to provide positive responses to the negative effects of pressure. Counseling and health services seek to relieve the physical and psychological symptoms associated with pressure and anxiety. Student activities programs--concerts, lectures, films, exhibits, etc.--serve as release mechanisms. Are such programs adequate? Do they meet the needs of both traditional and nontraditional students?
Another response to pressure is the release offered by athletics on the various campuses? Which specific sports do students prefer? Is there an increasing interest in individual recreational sports? Team sports offer an important outlet for both players and spectators, but the costs of intercollegiate team play have escalated as more teams seek support. Traditional varsity sports are threatened by rising travel costs. Are the athletic facilities providing adequate space and scheduling for students?

Given the fact that stress is part of life and cannot be eliminated, how can our campuses deal more constructively with it? Options like credit courses for orientation, stress management or assertiveness training might be explored.

C. DROPPING OUT

Some react to disappointment or pressure by dropping out.

Do we know why students drop out? Exit interviews and follow-up of students who leave may help tell us the reasons. How can we reinforce a student's determination to complete his/her program despite financial and academic pressures? Is staff development needed in this area?

More attention needs to be paid to the critical times in a student's career when dismissals, suspensions, formal withdrawals and "walkaways" may occur. Why do so-called "good" students drop out as often as those with poor records? What about the importance of age, sex, academic major to retention? There is a need for further study of these questions.
Do fewer students drop out at small campuses than at large ones? Is there a more personal atmosphere at the small campus which makes students feel part of a community? How can we bring this "personal touch" to the larger campuses?

Helping students to feel part of the university community is a central goal on all campuses.

D. INVOLVEMENT IN DECISION-MAKING

National surveys have shown that attrition is reduced and the sense of belonging increased when students have significant input into decisions affecting them. With this involvement should come an increased sense of responsibility as members of the University community. Students must not be passive consumers of educational services, but must rather be actively involved. How can we achieve this?

More student involvement is needed in:

--- Residential Life. Students often claim that too many decisions are made for them in the governance of residence halls. Does this cause the very problems which governance is supposed to alleviate? Does a "zoo atmosphere" prevail? Which problems result from the nature of dormitories themselves? Much can and should be done to improve the atmosphere of residence halls. Living/Learning centers and Co-op housing, as well as the more traditional model offered by fraternities: these are all options which need to be explored to increase student involvement in deciding how they will live.
--- University Committees. Students often find it difficult to be active and responsible participants because they feel that administration and faculty have too high expectations of their interest in the broad issues. Do students really care about the "big picture"? Would they rather reserve the right to criticize decisions after they have been made? These are questions which concern the professionals whose responsibility it is to reach and live with decisions.

--- Student Government. Plagued with budgetary problems, student apathy and increased career orientation, Student Government has had decreasing participation in recent years. With more student involvement on university committees, is Student Government becoming obsolete? Does it need structural changes?

--- Curriculum Development. Faculty may protest that students do not have the knowledge and experience to plan the curriculum. Nevertheless, changing student interests and employment prospects suggest that students should be involved when new courses are planned or old ones eliminated. Should students have some input in defining the package of requirements and electives within their majors?

A basic question on student involvement in decision-making remains to be answered: is the University as a whole prepared to take the risks associated with letting students participate?

Increased student involvement in decision-making will be so important in the coming decade that it merits serious examination, campus-by-campus.
SECTION THREE:

The four issues outlined above—expectations, pressure, dropping out, and involvement in decision-making—have emerged as crucial to student life in the nineteen-seventies and will probably continue to predominate in the '80s. There are at least two more which will be central in the future, in addition to the obvious cost-related issues of energy and inflation.

A. NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS

The re-examination of continuing education begun a few years ago has taken on a new focus with the realization that there exists a population of adults in Maine whose educational needs are not yet being met by the University. The University community is aware that we must address the interests of these nontraditional students. Many older students are part-time, but some are full-time. All, however, have different interests from those of traditional 18- to 22-year-old students.

A host of questions emerged as the Committee considered the nontraditional student:

--- Housing. Adult students don't want to live in dormitories, but do they need more off-campus housing? What, if anything, should the University do in examining and certifying off-campus accommodations? How serious a concern is housing for nontraditional students, who usually choose to attend a college near their home?
--- Student Unions. There should be a gathering place on all campuses in addition to classroom buildings, libraries, and athletic facilities. Are the campuses meeting this need? Should student unions provide special programs in addition to lounges, cafeterias, meeting rooms?

--- Student activity fees. Should part-time and nontraditional students pay the same activity fee as full-time students? Adult students complain that they don't want to attend rock concerts, while traditional students don't want to pay for day care. Some campuses are considering graduated activity fees.

--- Day care. Each year more students have young children and family obligations. Is day care a University responsibility? Should students be allowed to bring their children to some campus functions and facilities where admission is currently by ID card only?

--- Time scheduling. In the face of escalating energy costs, is there a way to schedule hours of libraries, athletic facilities, administrative offices, to meet the needs of evening students?

--- Transportation. Does the University have a responsibility to provide transportation for students? The limited availability of public transportation has in the past been offset by personal vehicles. Beyond ride-boards and car-pooling, what are the implications of the energy crisis for student transportation?
B. UNIVERSITY VS. "REAL" WORLD

Students in the '80s are experiencing an increased need to relate their education to the "real" world. This is particularly true of older students who often come or return to the campus for help with a career or life-change. Several campus activities are directly involved:

--- Career planning. Much valuable work is going on here but there is some debate on timing: are Freshmen ready to begin resume writing, for example? Career planning is an important part of the college experience, but it is not the only one. More coordination between student affairs and academic affairs is needed here. Are faculty sufficiently aware of the vocational objectives of their students?

--- Faculty development. At a time when teaching staff is increasingly tenured, what incentives can be offered to keep faculty in touch with changes in the "real" world? Are faculty aware of the latest development in/applications of their academic disciplines?

Is it possible to bring curriculum planning into line with career planning? Should this be a goal? Do we want the University's primary function to be that of an institution of higher learning, or should we seek a clearer vocational/occupational focus? Many disciplines are moving away from emphasis on content to a preoccupation with usable skills: Is this a good thing?
--- Cooperative Education/Field Experience. Can this concept be strengthened? What about some faculty complaints that it is not "academic" enough? Do students feel that this activity helps them to apply theories and explore career options as intended? A host of experiences, ranging from internships to field trips, should be available to all students. In addition, adult students may seek some recognition for previous life and work experience. How do the campuses feel about this topic?

Much is being done to bridge the gap between the University and the community, but more can and needs to be done.
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