Title
Educational Standards: a Moving Target

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5p28j1cb

Author
Gardner, David P.

Publication Date
1978-03-01

License
CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

Peer reviewed
Educational Standards: A Moving Target

We take particular pleasure in our identity as a Western association. If a region is a state of mind as much as a location, then we in the West can surely claim a distinctive outlook and will, it is hoped, have something to say to the rest of the country. To Daniel Webster, you may remember, everything out here was just the Great American Desert. He once opposed a mail route between Independence and the mouth of the Columbia River, declaring he would not vote one cent from the public treasury to bring the Pacific Coast an inch nearer to Boston. "What," he wanted to know, "do we want with this vast, worthless area?" Even as late as the 1930s, a condescending eastern senator thought he could tolerate two seasons from each of the western states as long as they were only seen but not heard.

This conference, I hope, will be heard. The subject deserves it. The theme, "Walls and Windows," permits one to play with those images: walls both support and obstruct; they can shut up or keep out; windows afford a view but on occasion glare and permit warm and cold air to move in and out. I should like to supplement these metaphors by thinking of educational standards as a moving target, in the hope that it will help illustrate why talking about standards is so difficult.

Educational standards are a moving target in relation to a number of significant ongoing changes—changes in our schools and colleges, in the country at large, and in the communities we serve. The changes are of consequential range and magnitude, for they are conceptual as well as social and technological. They are substantive changes in purpose and value as well as peripheral changes in process and procedure. The changes are interconnected. They form a fascinating pattern, a pattern in motion, a moving target. And, as with all moving targets, one must estimate its position, aiming not where it is, but where it will be if a hit is to be made. I hope in my brief remarks to identify some of the changes and to fix our sights on the target, while leaving to the scheduled sessions of this conference the job of finding its range.

Standards are a moving target in relation to knowledge itself, for knowledge is constantly changing. It is ever growing, providing new perspectives, demanding new tools and techniques for its discovery, transmission, and application. The paradox, of course, is that as the frontiers of learning advance, the horizon recedes. Knowledge begets new knowledge in quantum jumps, whether in our exploration of the outer space of the perceived universe or the inner space of the still mysterious self. In both directions teachers and taxpayers alike are hand-pressed to provide instruction of a kind suited to the present as well as to the future. A razor once sufficed to make one both barber and surgeon; a few books made a library. Nowadays, computer centers and electron microscopes are taken for granted, as is the need...
for great libraries and other resources indispensable to learning. The sub-
dividing of knowledge that characterizes the curricula and research of our in-
stitutions tends both to fragment the learning process and isolate our stu-
dents and faculty from seeing the wholeness of a problem or issue. "Experi-
ence," Stephen Bailey reminds us, "tends to be a friend of the particular and
an enemy of the general." Meanwhile, old skills once learned in appren-
ticeships at home, on the farm, or in the shop have been institutionalized and, in
substantial measure, these functions and the heightened expectations associ-
ated with them have been transferred to the educational system. The blending
in our curricula of the imperatives of specialization and the necessities of a
general or liberal education is, on the one hand, much more difficult as
knowledge itself expands. On the other hand, it is all the more essential if
knowledge is to have a completeness and coherence useful to the individual
as he lives his life and helpful to society as mankind collectively struggles
with the complexities and dysfunctions of the modern condition. Our institu-
tions of higher learning could do a better job of achieving this purpose were
we to have the objective more clearly in focus as we make judgments about
what we teach, what we expect our students to learn, and the standards we ap-
ply to the performance of each.

Beyond knowledge, however, lies wisdom. Knowledge cannot, as
Theodore Gross reminds us, "be only the sociology and economics and politi-
cal science of the moment, ever shifting, stimulating an anxiety that stems
from uncertainty, or the half-baked, foggy statistics that carry with them apparent truth." The knowledge most worth having may not be data so much as a cultivated
daring of the spirit, a daring born of attitudes and attitudes, the skills of in-
terpretation, a capacity for intellectual discrimination. Such skills lead to
the self-reliance and self-confidence that come from knowing some things well.
These are what Emens calls "granite truths." Knowledge of these truths,
coupled with judgment, yield wisdom. The nurturing and possession of
wisdom by teacher and student alike, therefore, must be an essential con-
sideration in any discussion of education and the standards we employ to
monitor and measure its worth.

Standards are a moving target in relation to social and technological
changes which, in turn, stimulate further changes in knowledge. Our schools
and colleges are not only the objects of these changes but their agents as well.
As agents, responsible for the growth and preservation of knowledge and
wisdom, we share responsibility for their consequences. Our expertise and
judgment engage and influence the society surrounding us as it in turn bears
in upon our options and opportunities. Ptolemaic's stature, however beautiful,
was stillborn until Aphrodite breathed life into it. The similarity between life
and society, and the reverse is true. The interchange of such life-giving in-
fluences impacts both educational standards and the velocity of the change in
them. The standards we set also influence alumni and public opinion. They
can either increase respect for the worth and work of our institutions of high-
er education or diminish the deserving nature of their cause.

Standards are a moving target in relation to the changing composition of
today's student body. These implicit admission, grading, and graduation
practices that, as we see daily in the news, can take us out of committees and
into the courts. Grade inflation, flooding admission standards, and accom-
modating graduation requirements are signs of the times. People's views
about them vary significantly and, sometimes, heatedly. However, the issues,
about which our commissions on quality and equity in education labor so hard to
which our commissions on quality and equity in education labor so hard to
define and resolve, come down, finally, to the claims of justice on the one
hand and mercy on the other. Our task is to put high abstractions and hopeless
and institutional requirements with fragile human needs and aspirations.

As applied to standards, justice has to do with the inexorable laws
governing the subject matter we teach, the unending but groundbreaking
truths of the alphabet and the times table; faulty mathematics will not build
good bridges; faulty medicine will not save lives; faulty history will not
enlighten us about the past; and faulty English will ultimately corrupt us.

Each discipline has its own Greenwich time, its own standard of weights and
measures by which performance must be judged even though the knowledge
which helps define the discipline changes over time. Students — men and
women alike, of whatever creed or color, cast or class — should be master of
what their diplomas professe them to be. Faculty above all, enjoying the pri-
mary authority that their understanding of a subject matter gives them, are, in
the end, responsible for maintaining that ultimate standard.

A denatured subject is a denatured standard. No slippery slide gets us
faster to soggy academic bottom than inflated grades and slackening teaching.
Both are betrayals of our charge. The one debases our students into thinking
they know more than they do and sends them backward. The other denies them
their true inheritance, an understanding and possession of disciplined work and authentic quality.

At the University of Utah, we are now entering the class average
alongside every letter grade on a student's transcript as a measure of how hard
or soft the student's grade is in relationship to the average grade earned by all
students in that particular course. We are also limiting honors at graduation
to a maximum of 25% of the graduates. Students above the 90th percentile
will graduate magna cum laude. Those in the 75th to 90th will graduate cum
ludae. The various colleges on campus have been asked to establish
academically related criteria for determining these limits during an interim
academically related criteria for determining these limits during an interim
academic policy. Thereafter, students will have to "get their ##es Points" under a for-
mula designed to add comparative excellence as a factor in awarding gradu-
ation honors. The remedy, we hope, is more than semantic.

In our compassion for students, we sometimes confuse personal growth
and academic progress in our evaluations. The "inward journey," personal
growth, is, let us hope, the inevitable accompaniment of education, but it is
largely ineffable. Academic progress can and must be measured, judged by
our standards appropriate to the discipline. We want both personal growth and
academic progress. We want compassion and humility in our students and
ourselves. No supply of it from us toward them or from them toward them-
ourselves, however, will take the place of knowledge — any more than that
seeks, however, will take the place of knowledge — any more than that
knowledge, once mastered, can save us without grace and wisdom in the use
of it.

I have been talking about justice as applied to standards and I seem to
have repudiated mercy. Not so. There is a place for mercy, as much as there is
for justice. Mercy, as applied to standards, has to do with the acknowledge-
ment that people learn at different rates and come to us unequally prepared. Surely there must be a means of investing in their potential as we do in the better prepared. These are the late starters, the overworked, the disadvanta-
gaged, the handicapped, the wafering and unsteady, the stammering and the re-born in our society. We must find a more enlightened way of enabling them, not by circumventing but by honoring these standards, to arrive at the same plateau of achievement, though by possibly different routes and schedules. Existing institutional and governmental programs tend too often to generalize the problem and coerce the solution. The present arrangement, therefore, tends to be dysfunctional for students and faculty alike. Justice motivates and rewards, mercy nourishes and enables. If in admissions we can afford mercy, then at graduation we must insist on justice. Let opportunity be as open as the means of the country, the community, and the institution allow. Let the process be merciful, but let there be no compromise in the product.

It will not do to homogenize either the students, the curriculum, or the distinctive attributes and purposes of our diverse and pluralistic system of higher education as we seek our solution. This is the tendency both in the expres-
sions of governmental interest in our internal affairs and in the rise of state systems of higher education with their accompanying bureaucracies. We are a pluralistic society but one nation, and educational policy must take both our unity and diversity into account.

Standards are a moving target in relation to rising costs and uncertain ap-
propriations and indeed to changing purposes and values, the changing pur-
poses and values being often dictated by the bottom dollar. Our policy, thy name is budget. Standards are inseparable from purpose and the willingness to fund the programs which translate purpose into action. To do well what we are able to do within the limits of our resources seems to be a far preferable policy than one which would extend our institutions and programs, in con-
sideration of current or entrenched interest, to the point where we find the en-
tire enterprise on the thin edge of its capability.

Standards are a moving target influenced by what Martin Trow has called the transition from mass to universal higher education, that is, the pres-
ent expectation on the part of most college-age persons that one form or another of post-secondary education will engage a portion of their life and experience. Thus, the range of interests and the variety of motivations and purposes that animate the student body and, therefore, inspire upon the es-
blished conventions of the higher learning, cannot help but materially in-
fluence the idea as well as the administration of standards. The influx of the older and more mature student will further complicate the problem. If the number of voluntary students enrolled in our colleges and universities has in-
terred, so too has the number of involuntary students. The latter are in attend-
dance, but uncommitted, seemingly unaware to connect a further education with their own futures. Perhaps more often than we are generally willing to acknowledge, there is no such link, and we should bring ourselves more readily to the point of accepting that fact even if not more cheerfully.

Standards are a moving target in relation to what Trow describes as the autonomous versus the popular functions of colleges and universities. The autonomous functions cast the university in its traditional role of creating, preserving and transmitting knowledge, the "high culture." It is elitist. The popular functions, more common in the United States, are the university in a service role. It is social and egalitarian. "The line between them," says Trow, "is not hard and fast... all university activities are in some sense responsive to societal interests." The first suggests privilege, the second, rights for all.

"Higher education," he says, "is assuming an increasingly important role in placing people in the occupational structure and, thus, in determining their adult class positions and life chances."

Obviously each function must be guided by appropriate standards. There

can be an academic division of labor between and within institutions, suggest-

ing that standards, depending on the nature of the institution and its role, are

best defined within the context of clearly articulated institutional purposes. A

system of post-secondary education that does not distinguish in its funding

and expectations between and among community, vocational, four-year col-

leges, and universities, however, is a bed of irascibles. Given the means, in-

stitutions and systems can and do adapt. In a time of change, they need to con-

struct programs and procedures that work, like those floating planks that rise

and fall with the tide but to which we can safely anchor and deliver cargo and

passengers.

The buffeting with which our institutions are presently obliged to con-

tend is a function primarily of the changes in which reference has already

been earlier made, some of which flow to us from the outside and some of

which are quite of our own doing. Our response, as the theme of this con-

ference implies, has, as to our institutions' essential standards and inner life,

been less certain and convincing than one might have expected. Have our reac-
tions to these changes and pressures on educational standards not really been

to more tentative and uncertain than those with which we ourselves are comforta-

ble? Has this not been so to at least in general?

It is true that the higher learning is afflicted with seemingly unending fiscal

problems. The reasons are many: complex inflation, competing social programs

in the public sector, disenchanted with research and student unrest in the 1960s

and early 1970s, which contributed so significantly to the startling loss of confi-

dence in the entire enterprise we call higher education. Thus, "Taxpayers, legisla-

tors and private donors," as Lord Eric Ashby has reported, have universities to
demonstrate (i) that they can govern them-

selves in reasonable tranquility; (ii) that they are being run efficiently ... and

(iii) that they can restore a consensus about a unifying set of purposes — pur-

poses that the supporting public can understand and defer to."

It should be obvious that no unifying set of purposes can be con-

ceptualized, much less administered or agreed to, in the absence of clearly

understood and articulated ideas about educational standards. The issue is

not to say that our colleges and universities must seek and secure for themselves a

common standard or one undifferentiated by the diverse character and pluralistic nature of higher education in this country. It is

rather to suggest that each institution look to itself for the formulation of educational standards, compatible with its own raison d'etre and within the

communicating purposes that have both sustained and given meaning to the

encompassing idea of the higher learning in western civilization. This conference

should help us all, each and every one. Thank you for the privilege of sharing it with

you.