

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY PROGRAMS: ARE THEY ACADEMICALLY JUSTIFIABLE?

Presented by:

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This spring the black leader James Foreman, under the threat of seizing church property, demanded \$500-million as a down payment from the churches for reparations to black Americans. I happen not to agree with either his concept of reparations or his method of achieving them. However, the incident serves to point up an issue that we can no longer ignore: at a time when over 50 percent of our high school graduates are going on to college, black students constitute only 4 percent of our total college enrollment. Of the 6,700,000 students attending American colleges, only 300,000 are black students - and half of this number are enrolled at Negro colleges. By comparison, on a nationwide basis, black students make up 15 percent of the high school population. The disproportionately low number of minority group students in the higher educational experience is largely due to the fact that many of these students have been unable to acquire the academic skills and the high school grades necessary for admission to our colleges. There was a time, not long ago, when this state of affairs was more or less accepted by both the blacks and the whites. In 1969, we have a very different climate. The black community has in various ways been defining and expressing its grievances against the status quo, and demanding that these grievances be redressed by the powers that be. And at college campuses throughout the country where radical and some not so radical white students have banded together in protests and demonstrations against the Establishment, the students' demands, however particular to a

given institution, have almost universally included the admission of an increased number of black students.

As college administrators, we are thus faced with two alternatives: to turn down and fight the demands, or to find ways through which we can implement those demands which are rational and legitimate. If our colleges are to survive as viable institutions in today's world, then I believe we must choose the latter course. We have reached the point where we can no longer sit back and debate whether or when to create broader opportunities for higher education. Instead, we must address ourselves to the urgent business of determining how to get on with this task. Two questions have to be answered: First, how can the demands be educationally implemented for the new body of students who are pressing for admission; and, second, how will the admission of these students affect the students who are already in college.

Let us now consider why so few minority group students were admitted under the existing system. It is not that our colleges have explicitly excluded these students. Current admissions standards are based primarily on past high school achievement and college board scores, and these criteria simply do not take into account the educational and environmental realities of our poverty areas. There is now a formidable body of evidence to show how slum living conditions and large city public schools have operated to prevent youngsters from realizing their potential. Unfortunately, in a social and educational system that allows for a good deal more upward mobility than

many other systems allow for, the disadvantaged student is still at a tremendous - if not altogether hopeless - disadvantage. Our actuarial admission criteria provide us with an economical method of sorting out middle-class candidates for college, but when we are concerned with urban ghetto youth who have attended ghetto schools, it is particularly unwarranted to assume that past academic performance in high schools is a direct function of ability. We must realize that good high school averages are usually indicative of a number of things - intellectual ability, appropriate motivation for academic success, adequate study skills, and a reasonably supportive environment. By the same token, low grades in high school can result from a deficiency in any of these variables. Yet each of these factors, with the exception of intelligence, is potentially changeable. For this reason it is an exceedingly difficult task to determine the potential educability of young people from urban ghettos who failed to achieve in high school.

We must recognize that whether a student does well or poorly in college is not just a result of dimensions that are characteristic of him prior to his admission to college. His success or failure also reflects a second group of variables related to the institution itself. The quality and method of instruction, the availability of different kinds and amounts of remedial teaching, counseling, financial assistance, medical care and living arrangements - all these factors interact with the characteristics of the individual student to determine what he learns. Of course, if the educational approach

in college is essentially the same as it was in high school, and if there is no change in the student's environment or motivation, then it seems reasonable to assume that those who rank highest in high school and on standardized tests will produce the greatest number of "successes" in college. But it must be acknowledged that such measures are ineffective when it comes to determining the educability of a specific individual.

What I have been leading up to is that it is not enough for a college to revise its admission policies and admit students who are unable to meet the traditional standards. The fact remains that these students who haven't achieved in the past are different from the traditional student body, and this difference cannot and should not be ignored. Once the students are brought in, it's the responsibility of the college to assess what skills they lack in comparison to the regular students, and to build a program to help them acquire those skills and help them be phased into the regular curriculum.

I first became involved with this educational question in the early sixties. At that time it wasn't one of the most popular educational projects, and for some time we had no success in acquiring financial support. Finally, in the spring of 1965, we were given a grant of \$125,000 to set up an experimental program for 100 high school graduates from the ghettos of New York. By September we had our 100 students, and the following summer, when the New York State Legislature passed a construction bill for the City University, the bill had a rider providing the University with \$1-million for the

establishment of a special education program for 1000 students from poverty areas. That was the beginning of the SEEK Program (SEEK, incidentally, is an acronym for "Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge"). The 100-student experimental program at City College became the prototype for SEEK. That program was expanded, and new programs were established at Queens College and Brooklyn College. The total enrollment for the first year of operation came to 600 full-time and 800 part-time students.

By its third year - 1968-69 - SEEK had developed into an \$8-1/4 million program with approximately 3000 students, almost all of them full-time, who were enrolled at eight senior colleges of the City University. From the beginning, about 90 percent of the SEEK students have been black or Puerto Rican. All are residents of officially designated poverty areas of the city. None of them met the standard admissions criteria for any of the City University colleges.

Let us now turn to the method of selection. When we first started in 1965, we made an attempt to take many things into consideration. We read the evaluations and recommendations of high school teachers and principals, and we looked at the students' transcripts. For the first year or two, we tried to select students on the basis of an analysis of their high school records. If the students had averages in the low 70's, we looked for some indication of past achievement - some high points, rather than a bland 72 in all subjects. As the program grew, however, we shifted to a totally random method of selection, and that's the method we have continued to use, Frankly,

I have been skeptical about the prospects of identifying promising students on the basis of personal interviews. It has been our experience that a poor student may create a better impression in an interview than a gifted student. Too often, an interviewer reaches conclusions that reflect unsubstantiated or undefined criteria. For example, social graces or qualities of leadership are not necessarily indicative of an individual's intellectual or esthetic capacities; yet interviewers, perhaps understandably, are inclined to respond to an applicant's personality. The recommendations of high school personnel proved to be virtually worthless to us; they only showed that the administrators and teachers and guidance counselors of our ghetto schools hardly knew one student from the other. Besides, the students' high school records testified to the fact that these same people had failed to develop the capabilities of these students over a long period of time. Most of the students we were considering had in fact been steered away from the academic, college-preparatory tract by their guidance counselors, and as a result they came to us with general or vocational high school diplomas rather than academic diplomas. According to a survey taken a few years ago in New York City, only 5 percent of the students who completed high school with an academic diploma were either black or Puerto Rican, whereas blacks and Puerto Ricans together account for over 50 percent of the city's public school population.

In recruiting applicants, we have to a large extent relied on the help of local community agencies. We maintain contact with over 1500 agencies located in the five boroughs of New York, and they have

been our principal allies in referring prospective students to the program. The active participation of these agencies has also been invaluable in demonstrating to the black and Puerto Rican community that higher educational opportunities are available - that there are doors which are open to them despite a lot of evidence to the contrary.

I am well aware, and I feel obliged to remind you, that I am talking about the City University of New York, where, among other things, we have operated a program that is considerably larger than any other experimental program is likely to be. This past year, we admitted 1800 new students, and according to the University's Master Plan, we'll be admitting 3500 students by 1975. Our methods may be effective for our purposes, but perhaps in different areas of the country, and in dealing with different numbers of students, other methods can be used with equal or greater effectiveness.

The selection of the students is only the beginning of our program. At the City University we do not select students with a view of a specific program. I believe it is more realistic and effective to first identify the population we must service and then build a program which can meet the needs of the students we accept. Since the students are a much more heterogeneous group than the usual freshman class, we aim to provide an individualized educational experience for each student, so that each will have an opportunity to develop his potential to the fullest extent. Only then will we be able to assess a student's level of educability under favorable

environmental conditions. The essential ingredients of our program are counseling, curriculum, and financial assistance, and I will discuss them in that order.

An unusual feature of SEEK is its emphasis on the role played by the psychologist-counselors attached to the program. Every student is assigned to a counselor, and at least for the first year of college, he meets with his counselor on a regular weekly basis. There is one counselor to every 40 or 50 students. In addition to serving as an academic adviser, the counselor provides a personal kind of freshman orientation and is an important element of continuity throughout the student's college years. Colleges are basically middle-class oriented institutions, and there is very little in the background of disadvantaged students which prepares them to compete successfully in such an environment. For many students, success in college will require a massive change in habits, values and daily routine. Some of the advice and information that middle-class students may get from family and friends is simply not available to those who come from poverty areas. They have no experience with academic goals, and they hardly know anyone who has been to college. Highly motivated students will succeed despite the usual frustrations of dealing with bureaucratic demands at large, impersonal institutions. On the other hand, students who are skeptical and ambivalent about college to begin with, and who doubt that they are really wanted or belong there, will see their doubts as being confirmed when they are confronted with the bureaucratic structure. The counselor's role is to serve as a bridge

between the student and the Establishment, to help the student connect up with the academic life.

The counselor's role is not an easy one. The young black or Puerto Rican student typically is in the midst of an intense struggle to establish his identity with pride. The student who wishes to acquire a college degree is faced with rejection by his peer group if his behavior deviates from theirs; and he does not know if he wants to be accepted - nor does he have any assurance that he will be accepted - by the group that makes up the majority. By the time they enter college, many of these students have accumulated a vast experience of frustration and failure. Although they may aspire to high-prestige occupations, they wonder if they can expect to achieve such goals. They are not personally acquainted with anyone who has achieved success; so while they may overtly express confidence, they are inwardly convinced that people like themselves "don't have a chance" to be successful in life. These students lack the ability to postpone gratification of immediate needs in order to achieve long-range goals, because these long-range goals seem all too remote and abstract. The counselor establishes a relationship with the student in the course of working out a program of studies with him; and if problems arise that threaten to interfere with the student's academic progress, the counselor is there to help the student solve those difficulties before they become cumulative and force the student to drop out of the program prematurely.

I am sometimes asked why the SEEK counselors are clinical psychologists by training, since a relatively low percentage of the students

actually use their counselors as therapists. When we began to develop the program, I turned to clinicians for assistance not only because of professional chauvinism, but also for some more rational reasons. As I see it, the greatest asset of a good clinician is his genuine interest in people and his ability to communicate. A psychologist has been trained to be a problem-solver, and to function in situations full of ambiguity. He has presumably acquired a sufficient understanding of himself, and is secure enough in his own identity, that he will not impose himself on another person. His training equips him to deal constructively with the hostility, suspicion and apathy that may detract from a student's ability to profit from college instruction. The question that often arises is, can a student be helped to expand his environment, and orient himself to the larger environment - and build a sense of trust in it - without this becoming an experience in which the student is merely being encouraged to adjust to the demands of society.

In addition, in a broadly based program, the counselor must provide support and encouragement, but must also take into account the fact that a person may be harmed not only by being discouraged from obtaining a college-level education, but also through inappropriate encouragement that results in failure. When there is sufficient evidence that a student is not educable on the college level, he must be helped to utilize the college experience in finding an alternate vocational objective. Some students choose to transfer to one of the two-year community colleges for training in a field such as

medical or engineering technology. Others decide to enter a program where they can acquire specific job skills, in order to become, say, a computer operator. Still others want a job that does not demand specialized training, and if they need help in finding a suitable job, they are referred to SEEK's placement service.

Our curriculum reflects our belief that many of our students will prove capable of doing college work if they are assigned to courses appropriate to their level of achievement, and if special workshops and individual tutoring are made available to the students - either on an optional or on a mandatory basis, according to the student's needs. The SEEK Program is designed to be as flexible as possible, so that students have the opportunity to make up basic deficiencies and yet can enter regular college classes as soon as they are prepared to do so. On the basis of placement exams, incoming students are assigned to coursework in one of three categories: intensive remedial coursework, regular college courses, or courses specially designed to integrate remedial work with college-level work. These specially designed courses cover the same syllabus as the regular college courses, but the classes meet for more hours - sometimes twice as many hours as the regular classes - and are limited to from 10 to 15 students per class. When the SEEK students successfully complete their special courses, they not only receive credit for the work they have done, but are also prepared to enroll in more advanced courses in the same department, along with non-SEEK students.

Many faculty members have been concerned about the presence on

campus of a large body of students who are not on a par academically with the regularly admitted students. What they fear is the ultimate devaluation of academic standards. This objection has been anticipated and met - at least to the satisfaction of many of the faculty - by the individualized programming that provides a separate educational experience for the SEEK students in the areas in which they are weak.

Ours is a frankly experimental program, and one of the things we have experimented with from time to time is the point at which our students may be ready to enter classes on a competitive basis with the regularly admitted students. As a rule, even our first-term students take at least one course with the "regular" students - generally in a nonsequential subject such as sociology or psychology. Some of the colleges participating in the SEEK Program have instituted courses taking into account the special interests of our students and the special contributions they have to make in the classroom. For example, last year one college offered a humanities course entitled "American Traditions of Social Change," which was taken by all the freshman SEEK students and an equal number of non-SEEK students.

English has been one of the subjects in which almost all of the students have started out in one or another of the special SEEK classes. In the fall of 1967, however, the English Department at The City College decided to give a number of our students the benefit of the doubt, and place them in regular college classes. The 35 students who were chosen to take part in this experiment had only scored in the 25th percentile on their English entrance exam, but their essay-type responses had

shown that despite poor performance on this objective test, they had no glaring language problems. During the academic year these students had access to tutorial assistance from advanced students at the college who were, for the most part, English majors. As it turned out, most of the 35 students were able to pass the regular English course, and one of them got an A.

But most of the students must undergo a long, hard struggle in order to bring their writing skills and reading comprehension up to college level. The effort is not a one-sided proposition. SEEK teachers have to be both dedicated and imaginative enough to work out alternatives to the traditional teaching methods. There is a tremendous interest in new techniques on the part of the faculty - perhaps most of all the English faculty. We have been operating on the assumption that "standard English" - that is, the English language as it is used in colleges and in traditional literature - is a skill necessary for success not only in college, but in a good many fields of endeavor which our students may eventually wish to enter into. Many students have long been accustomed to using the Negro dialect in writing as well as in speaking. Standard English is a second language for these students, just as it is for the Puerto Rican students. Instead of ignoring this fact, the English teachers have confronted it by first demonstrating how the Negro dialect itself functions as a legitimate language system. We have found that with this background, the student is better able to acquire a good understanding of the workings of standard English grammar.

Since there are actually eight different SEEK programs, each with its own director, and there are several different departments involved at each of the eight participating colleges, the possibilities for experimental teaching are multiplied accordingly. The curriculum at each institution suggests different opportunities for interdepartmental coursework or coordination between departments. For example, at one college, teachers from three departments - reading, speech and English - got together and formed a teaching team for the intensive study of selected texts. With the reading teacher, the students came to grips with the essential meaning of the work, whether it was a collection of essays, a novel or a play. The speech teacher functioned to give each student a sense of personal involvement with the text, and to develop his esthetic awareness. When the English teacher took over, the students were ready to discuss the philosophical ideas and implications of the work on a sophisticated level. At the risk of a certain amount of duplication of efforts, the students really learned what it was to explore a work of literature in depth.

At another college, where virtually all the beginning SEEK students are enrolled in special English and social science courses, these two courses are coordinated, and work in skills development is included in both courses. While the same text is sometimes chosen for study in both courses, there is a preference for using complementary texts rather than the same texts, in order to expose the students to a greater range of authors and ideas. For example, when Lord of the

Flies is being studied in English classes, Civilization and its Dis-  
contents is studied in the social science classroom. The students  
may learn about Freud in social science and then apply this know-  
ledge to the study of literature; or they may discuss the conflict  
of reason versus emotion - or the individual versus society - as it  
is seen in literature, and then view the same thing from a different  
perspective in social science. At its best, this sort of interde-  
partmental coordination results in a stimulating cross-fertilization  
of ideas. Perhaps this is what is at the heart of the learning process.

On occasion, the counselors are called upon to serve as re-  
source people to members of the teaching faculty. At times, a counselor's  
knowledge of a student and insight into his problems can be useful to  
the teacher who is attempting to find a more effective way of working  
with that student. If a student isn't moving along satisfactorily, the  
teacher is expected to communicate this to the counselor, and to ex-  
plore different approaches in the classroom. Just as college is a  
strange new world to a student from the ghetto, the experience of  
teaching disadvantaged students is a new experience for many of the  
faculty. In this area of teaching, the interpersonal relationship  
between the student and the teacher takes on a special importance.  
It behooves the teacher to examine his attitudes toward the students  
and consider whether he is communicating his belief in their ability  
to achieve.

Earlier, I mentioned that financial assistance was one of the three necessary elements of our program, along with counseling and curriculum. In trying to set up a situation in which students would have a real chance to develop their potential, we could hardly afford to overlook the financial and physical realities of the students' lives. The students who are regularly admitted to the City University do not pay tuition, and neither do our students. But our students also receive their books free and a weekly stipend to cover their living expenses. In addition, student housing is provided for a limited number of the SEEK students, because some of them have been living under conditions that are prohibitive of effective studying.

Virtually all the SEEK students work during the summer vacation to help meet expenses for themselves and their families, and many of them find summer jobs through SEEK's placement services.

Let us ask now how can we measure the effectiveness of a program of this kind. Perhaps the title of my presentation "Educational Opportunity Programs: Are they Academically Justifiable?" is in itself misleading because it anticipates a response in terms of conventional criterion, that is, it requires a comparison of grades and degrees granted for the two groups. It is my hope and belief that higher education has a more profound effect on students than their grades. But how can one measure the growth of a person, and the degree to which his education or experience broadened him? Can education contribute to making a group of alienated youth part of the greater society?

While some of our extremist New Left and black students make one wonder if education contributed to making them part of the society, it is my feeling that meaningful educational experience is more likely to make the black and Puerto Rican community relate to and have an investment in our current social and political system than the state of alienation in which they have been till this day.

At this point, let me share with you some data on the progress of our students in the SEEK Program. Perhaps, it would be easiest if you will follow me on the Tables I have given you earlier.

The first page gives you some idea of the student's high school achievement. The following pages describes the retention rates, grades achieved and credits earned for the City College SEEK Program. The City College Program is the oldest of the programs. It started as the Pre-Baccalaureate Program in Sept. 1965 and became the prototype of the SEEK Program.

(Discuss Tables)

During the past year, as part of the wide spread movement of blacks to define and assert their self-identity, SEEK students have been making their demands heard also. A typical list of demands, among other things, include black control, black faculty, and "relevant" curriculum. These demands cannot and must not be ignored. They have important implications on higher education and they have profound consequences on special educational programs.

How should we select an administrator for an educational opportunity program? Must he be black? There are blacks who argue that he must be black because students must be provided a model to identify with. They state that the black student needs the experience of seeing a black man in a position of authority. I believe that we cannot talk about a model without first defining what the model is for. Is our goal integration or have we already given up on it? Because if we are to provide a model for integration then what we need is not a black man in authority over other black men in a black educational program but we need black men in various positions of authority in the University and also white men in positions of authority in black programs. We must remember that the practice of having black officers in black units of the Armed Forces was much less meaningful than the current practice of having black officers in positions of authority over white men.

Why is there a demand for black administrators? Is it perhaps because some blacks believe and perhaps quite accurately, that there is still considerable discrimination against black professionals? Are we not copping out when we so readily agree to appoint black administrators in educational opportunity programs while not making much effort to appoint capable and

qualified black administrators in our Universities? Are we perhaps engaged in false hopes that black administrators will better "control" the black students? Are we sure that the lack of white participation may not be experienced by blacks as a result of a lack of interest in them? Can we accept the rhetoric that only blacks can communicate to blacks? If our hope and aspiration is to live together in this country then this statement cannot be accepted. Communication is a skill which is learned. There are times and conditions when meaningful communications are difficult. If there is a lack of communication - and there is - it becomes even more important to have an integrated staff.

If we cannot at this time communicate effectively enough, let us learn together to communicate more effectively. Statements that blacks must first find themselves among themselves before they can relate to whites are misleading. There is no evidence that isolation of a group from another group, be it self-imposed or imposed externally, ever prepares that group to relate better to the other group at a later time. On the contrary, there is evidence that when a group is isolated and communication decreases, then there is increased distortion, there are rumors, there is suspicion, there is anxiety and increased hostility.

Curriculum is another burning issue, closely related to the issue of segregated staffs. We have until now, I believe, neglected a great body of knowledge of critical importance. Here I am referring to the omission of contribution by blacks to history, literature and the arts. The question is how to bring about the needed change. Undoubtedly curriculum revisions are called for, but as I see it, the answer is not to set up separate curriculum for black students like in a Black Studies School.

This will not only fail to correct past distortions but will create new distortions.

Today, the ivory towers of academia no longer provide us with serenity, but they do provide us with an exciting challenge. What I am afraid of is that instead of embracing this educational challenge creatively, we will become frightened and take the easy way out. In the educational opportunity programs, it may be the easiest to permit blacks to do their own thing. Curiously, this is exactly what blacks who have given up hope in the whites are also asking for. But how representative are they among the black youth? In my experience, the opinion makers are not representative of the true aspirations of the black youth. This does not mean that individuals will publicly speak out against them, but when you are speaking to students individually and privately, or when you give students an opportunity to express themselves in writing without their being identified, you will begin to get a different picture. For example, in one of our programs this past spring, among the eleven demands were the following two:

1. Ethnic balance should be established in such a way that it reflects the ethnic ratio of the students of the center;
2. It must be recognized that the academic qualifications need at times to be waived in the case of black and Latin American teachers.

These demands were written by a small group of opinion makers. Superficially, the demands appeared to have had the support of a large group of students. A month later, the students filled out anonymous evaluations on their teachers and counselors. Overwhelmingly, they rated them, irrespective of race, as "helpful". The students wanted "to keep the same counselor or teacher", they stated that "counselors should be as they are", they preferred "persons

professionally trained with graduate school training", and they stated that "their teachers' and counselors' ethnic background doesn't matter". During the confrontation they singled out a white woman teacher. Among other things, some which cannot be printed, they criticized her because "in her course there are 13 books of which only two are by black or Puerto Rican authors and the rest are by Italians, Irish, and Jews. In other words, minorities not representative of the minorities at the Center". Within a month she was rated as the best of the 18 English teachers. The other teachers who came off with top ratings were the more experienced, demanding teachers who had more professional graduate training than their colleagues. By the same token, the fact that a teacher was young or revolutionary or New Left did not win him a high rating.

In summary, let me state that in my experience, Educational Opportunity Programs are academically feasible and justified. The development of an effective program, however, is quite complex and it commands a careful study. To be successful, we must have the courage to re-examine our old beliefs and our sacred myths, and we must have the power to resist the rhetoric of 1969.