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Additional Information

How Are We Doing?

Tracking the Quality of the Undergraduate Experience, 1960s to the Present

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Abstract

This paper examines outcomes and student efforts devoted to educationally purposeful activities at different points. While substantial proportions of students make noteworthy progress in intellectual and communication skills, personal and social development, and vocational training, declines occurred in literature, arts, science, and values development. One explanation for the declines is that students on average expend less effort in many areas since the mid-1980s, even though they are getting higher grades.

Over the past 15 years, the national reports about undergraduate education have two things in common. First, they presume that the quality of undergraduate education is not what it once was ([Association of American Colleges, 1985, 1991](#); [Boyer, 1987](#); [Cheney, 1989](#); [Education Commission of the States, 1995a](#); [Study Group, 1984](#); [Wingspread Group, 1993](#)). Second, the presumption of declining quality is based primarily on the perceptions of various groups of stakeholders, not systematic studies of student performance. Except for transcript analyses ([Adelman, 1995](#); [Zemsky, 1989](#)), there are precious few studies comparing the experiences of different cohorts of **[End Page 99]** undergraduates and what happens to them as a result of participating in higher education. Without benchmarks spanning several decades, we cannot determine whether the quality of undergraduate education has gone up or down, or if recent efforts to reform undergraduate education are having the desired effects. Perhaps students today are benefitting as much or more as their counterparts of two and three decades ago. This would be an impressive accomplishment, inasmuch as the number of undergraduates has increased by more than a third since 1970, and the college-going experience for many students looks different— at least on the surface—than the typical experience of the 1960s and 1970s ([Astin, 1997](#); [Pascarella & Terenzini, 1997](#)).

In reality, many students now come to college . . . less prepared to undertake academic inquiry and have less leisure for scholarly pursuits. Their interest in education is likely to be far more practical than that of the student of 30 years ago. . . . Students these days may need to work on basic skills [and] regard college as vocational preparation in a much less abstract sense than students once did.

([Menand, 1997](#), pp. 48–49)

Menand's description confirms what in the faculty psyche is a fundamental difference between the character of the current cohort of undergraduates and that of earlier generations. Faculty wistfully recall that students in the 1960s and 1970s were more intellectually engaged and wanted more from college than simply tickets for a comfortable life. Such recollections are not necessarily accurate, however. Consider Norman Cousins's depiction of undergraduates in 1960:

The distance [has seldom been greater] between the interested and the disinterested, between the intellectually curious and the routine, between the concerned and the detached. . . . [Some] follow national and world affairs with genuine concern; they seem to be able to distinguish between good and poor sources of information; they know how and what to read. . . . They seem alert, alive, responsible. But the melancholy fact is that they tend to be few in number, very few, and the drop to the others is almost precipitous. . . . Most . . . have a mechanistic view of college. The purpose seems to be to get out of school as uneventfully and expeditiously as possible, rather than to get out of it the most that is possible. . . . Grades are . . . purely utilitarian. . . . They lead to . . . good jobs.

(Cousins, 1960, p. 22)

Taken at face value, these descriptions of the typical undergraduate by Louis Menand in the mid-1990s and Norman Cousins almost four decades earlier suggest that what college students today do and get from higher education may not be all that different from previous cohorts. **[End Page 100]**

Purpose

In this paper I examine the quality of the undergraduate experience in the 1990s using data from students spanning four decades: the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. I address two questions: First, did college students in the 1960s and 1970s gain more from their undergraduate experience than subsequent cohorts? If so, the calls for reforming undergraduate education in the 1980s and since would be justified. Second, are reforms having the desired effects? That is, is the quality of the undergraduate experience improving?

Methods

Instrument

The data reported in this paper reflect the responses of undergraduates to similarly worded items used in survey research from the late 1960s through 1997. The first instrument was a questionnaire developed by C. Robert **Pace (1974)** for a comparative study of students at different types of institutions. The rest of the data were collected at subsequent points in time using the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) (**Pace, 1984**). The **CSEQ (1990b)** assesses what matters to student learning in college by collecting information about students' background (e.g., age, race, gender, place of residence, enrollment status, and parent education) and their experiences in three areas. The first area is the amount of time and energy (quality of effort) students devoted to various activities during the current school year. All items on the CSEQ's 14 activities scales and the four additional reading and writing items correlate positively with many desired outcomes of college (**Pace, 1987, 1990b**). The second major section of the CSEQ is made up of 23 gain scales which represent a broad array of outcomes that experts agree are among the most important goals of higher education. Students' responses to the CSEQ gains items can be considered value-added judgments in that the results are consistent with other evidence collected over decades. The third section collects information about students' perceptions of eight key dimensions of their institution's environment. Because changes were made in the wording of several items from the second (1983–1989) to the third (1990–1998) editions of the CSEQ, I used only those items common to both editions in the analysis, unless specified otherwise.

Data Sources

This study draws on two sets of data from multiple sources collected at four different time periods. The first two periods, 1969 and 1979–81, predate the national calls for educational reform in the mid-1980s; the latter **[End Page 101]** two periods (1990–1991 and 1996–1997) are coterminous with the dissemination of various statements of good practices in undergraduate

education (e.g., **American Association for Higher Education, 1992; Chickering & Gamson, 1987**). Thus, comparing student responses at different points in time between 1969 and 1997 can provide an indication of whether institutional efforts at improving undergraduate education are having the desired effects.

The first data set is composed of students' responses to gains items on a questionnaire administered in 1969 (**Pace, 1974**) and responses to comparable items from 1979–1981 (**Pace, 1984**), 1990–1991, and 1996–1997 taken from the CSEQ national data base at Indiana University. The 1969 data represent 7,369 end-of-year juniors at 79 colleges and universities (**Pace, 1974**); the 1979–1981 data are from 2,135 seniors at 30 colleges and universities (**Pace, 1984**); the 1990–1991 data are from 7,376 seniors at 54 institutions; and the 1996–1997 data are from 8,647 seniors at 49 institutions.

The second data set represents students' responses to items on the CSEQ activities scales. The mid-1980s data were collected between 1983 through 1986 from 25,606 students at 74 colleges and universities (**Pace, 1987**); the mid-1990s data are from 50,188 students at 66 institutions collected between 1992 through 1996 (**Kuh, Vesper, Connolly, & Pace, 1997**). Taken together, the colleges and universities from which the data are drawn represent reasonable, though not perfect, cross-sections of institutions from different parts of the country and include doctoral-granting universities, comprehensive colleges and universities, and liberal arts colleges.

Results: Were the Calls for Reforms Justified?

Table 1 shows the proportions of upper-division students saying they made substantial progress in important areas. That is, they gained “quite a bit” or “very much” in intellectual and communication skills, personal and social development, knowledge breadth and depth, science, literature, and the arts, and vocational preparation. The gains of the four cohorts are comparable in four areas, as about three-quarters of the students from all the time periods for which data are available for the respective item reported substantial progress in critical thinking, self-directed learning, and social development; and more than two-thirds reported increases in breadth and depth of general education and background for further study.

Table 1.

Upperclass Students Reporting “Substantial Progress”¹ in Selected Outcome Areas (in percentages)

<i>Goal Statement</i>	<i>1969</i> ²	<i>1979–81</i> ³	<i>1990–91</i> ⁴	<i>1996–97</i>	<i>Goal Statement</i>
Intellectual and Communication Skills	72	70	70	73	Ability to think analytically and logically
Critical thinking: logic, inference, nature, and limitations of knowledge		80	75	75	Ability to see relationships, similarities, differences between ideas
		85	82	81	Ability to learn on one's own
			54	65	Familiarity with computers
Writing and speaking: clear, correct, effective communication	49	54	64	67	Writing clearly and effectively

Goal Statement	1969²	1979– 81³	1990– 91⁴	1996– 97	Goal Statement
Personal and Social Development Social development: experience and skill in relating to other people	75	79	79	75	Understanding other people; ability to get along with different people
Personal development: understanding one's abilities and limitations, interests, and standards of behavior	84	82	79	77	Understanding oneself: one's abilities, interests, and personality
		73	71	69	Developing one's own values and ethical standards
		57	68	71	Ability to function as a team member
Breadth and Depth Vocabulary, terminology, and facts in various fields of knowledge	69	71	70	68	Gaining a broad general education about different fields of knowledge
Awareness of different philosophies, cultures, and ways of life	69	63	56	58	Becoming aware of different philosophies, cultures, and ways of life
Background and specialization for further education in some professional, scientific, or scholarly field	71	74	69	71	Acquiring background and specialization for further education in some professional, scientific, or scholarly field
Science, Literature, and Arts Science and technology: understanding and appreciation	43	39	34	38	Understanding the nature of science and experimentation
		40	31	34	Understanding scientific and technical developments
Broadened literary acquaintance and appreciation	57	37	36	36	Broadening one's acquaintance with and enjoyment of literature
Aesthetic sensitivity: appreciation and enjoyment of art, music, drama	53	34	34	30	Developing an understanding/enjoyment of art, music, drama

<i>Goal Statement</i>	<i>1969²</i>	<i>1979– 81³</i>	<i>1990– 91⁴</i>	<i>1996– 97</i>	<i>Goal Statement</i>
Vocational training	40	59	60	57	Acquiring knowledge and skills applicable to a specific job or type of work (vocational preparation)

1. “Very much” or “quite a bit”

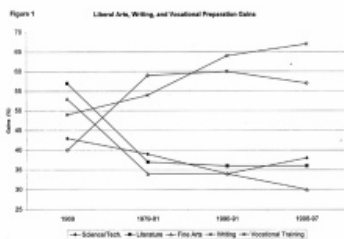
2. C. R. Pace. (1974). The demise of diversity? A comparative profile of eight types of institutions. Berkeley: Carnegie Commission on Higher Education.

3. C. R. Pace (1984). Measuring the quality of student experiences. Los Angeles: Center for the Study of Education, UCLA Graduate School of Education.

4. Figures for this column and the next (1996–1997) are from the College Student Experiences Questionnaire Research and Distribution Program, Indiana University

In four areas (writing, vocational preparation, functioning as a team member, and familiarity with computers) the proportions of students reporting substantial gains increased markedly. In the case of writing and functioning as a team member, the increases were steady over time, from less than half in 1969 to two-thirds in 1997 for the former and from 57% in [End Page 104] 1981 to 71% in 1996–1997 for the latter. In the case of vocational preparation, a jump of almost 20% occurred between 1969 and 1981 (Table 1). While these upward trends were consistent for all types of institutions, the proportions varied by institutional type. For example, there was a difference of 15 points on writing gains between students at selective liberal arts colleges (SLAs) and students at doctoral universities (DUs) (Kuh, Vesper, Connolly, Pace, 1997) in 1997 and a difference of 18 points on vocational preparation gains between students at comprehensive colleges and universities (CCUs) and general liberal arts colleges (GLAs) in 1981 (Pace, 1984).

At the same time, declining proportions of students reported substantial progress across time in five areas: (a) personal development, (b) awareness of different philosophies and cultures, (c) understanding of science and experimentation, (d) broadening acquaintance and an enjoyment of literature, and (e) understanding and enjoyment of art, music, and theater. Figure 1 shows that sharp drops of about 20% in literature and the arts occurred prior to the 1980s, leveling off in 1996–1997 with only about 36% reporting substantial gains in literature, and 30% in the arts.



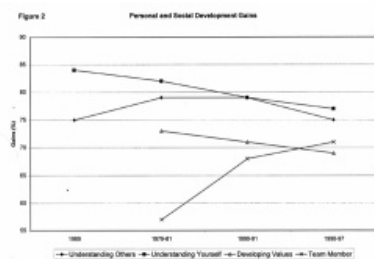
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Figure 1.

Liberal Arts, Writing, and Vocational Preparation Gains

Figure 2 shows that the 7% drop in students reporting substantial gains in self-understanding has been gradual over time (from 84% in 1969 to 77% in 1996–1997). A modest decline also occurred after 1981 in the proportion of students who made substantial progress in developing their values (73% to 69%); this question was not included on the 1969 survey. The decrease in proportions of students reporting substantial progress in values development was uniform across all types of institutions, though it was most pronounced at general liberal arts colleges (GLAs) where a 6% drop occurred on developing values (69% to 63%) and self-understanding (78% to 72%), with a 9% drop in understanding and getting along with others (81% to 72%). These data are not shown in a table but are reported in **Kuh, Vesper, Connolly, and Pace (1997)**. A portion of the declines may be attributed to shifts in curricular emphases as there now appear to be two distinct clusters of GLAs which are distinguishable by the proportions of students majoring in traditional liberal arts area and applied areas (**Pace, 1997**). One subset is the traditional GLA, colleges where substantial proportions of students major in the liberal arts fields. **Pace (1997)** contends that a second form has evolved, the vocational liberal arts college (VLA), which is more of a baccalaureate vocational training institute in which the majority of students major in applied areas. (See also **Delucchi, 1997**.) At the traditional GLAs, more than 70% of students report substantial progress in developing their values compared with only 59% at the VLAs (**Pace, 1997**).



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Figure 2.
 Personal and Social Development Gains

Another perspective on the quality of undergraduate education can be seen in the fractions of students who gain very little in certain areas. The areas where the largest proportions of students in the mid-1990s gained **[End Page 105]** very little include the performing arts (33%), science (30%), literature (29%), and knowledge of other parts of the world (26%). In the mid-1980s, similar proportions of students at DUs and CCUs reported very little progress in these areas with the proportions of students at SLAs and GLAs being only slightly smaller in the mid-1980s.

Comparing Student Effort in the 1980s and 1990s

Assessments of student learning and personal development gains are necessary but incomplete evidence of the quality of undergraduate education. Indeed, relying exclusively on outcomes indicators may underestimate the quality of the undergraduate experience in the 1990s. After all, if a teaching-to-learning paradigm shift (**Barr & Tagg, 1995**) is underway, it will take time for these new approaches to show their effects in learning and personal development gains. However, learning-centered activities should be reflected almost immediately in changes in process indicators—what students are doing, how they spend their time, and how much effort they devote to activities that matter to their education, such as course learning, studying, and so forth. Many sources show that students benefit more when they do the things that matter, such as interacting with faculty and peers, participating in active and cooperative learning activities, and using the library and other information resources (**Astin, 1984, 1993; Pace, 1990a; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991**). Thus, we can anticipate what will happen to outcomes by looking at what students are doing with their time—behaviors that are measured by the CSEQ’s activities scales.

To discern whether reform efforts are improving undergraduate education, I compared indices of student effort from samples of students from the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s. Comparing responses to the CSEQ activities scales of students from the mid-1990s with those of their counterparts from the mid-1980s may reveal whether educational reforms are having the desired effect. These analyses include first-year through senior undergraduates, as contrasted with the gains data in **Table 1** which reflect only upper-division students.

Respondents from the two groups were comparable on key biographical variables across the institutional types in terms of age, gender, year in school, marital status, and enrollment status (more than 90% were full-time students). Consistent with other studies of contemporary undergraduates (**Astin, 1997**), CSEQ respondents in the 1990s at all institutions reported higher grades, with the largest increases at CCUs, a 9% jump, from 31% with B+ or better grades in the 1980s to 40% in the 1990s (**Table 2**); DUs and SLAs had smaller increases, about 5%. The mid-1990s respondents were somewhat more diverse in terms of race and ethnicity (**Table 2**), especially at DUs (explained in part by the presence of several California universities [**End Page 108**] and the University of Hawaii in the mid-1990s sample); also, more students at SLAs and CCUs were working. This is not surprising, given the changes in the composition of undergraduates over the past 25 years (**Pascarella & Terenzini, 1997**).

Table 2.
Selected Respondent Characteristics

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>DUs</i>		<i>CCUs</i>		<i>SLAs</i>		<i>GLAs</i>		<i>URBs</i>	
	<i>80s</i>	<i>90s</i>	<i>80s</i>	<i>90s</i>	<i>80s</i>	<i>90s</i>	<i>80s</i>	<i>90s</i>	<i>80s</i>	<i>90s</i>
College Grades										
A	11	13	8	01	7	12	12	11	NA	8
A-, B+	25	28	22	28	39	40	26	28	NA	27
B	29	29	27	28	34	31	29	28	NA	28
B-, C+	28	23	32	26	17	14	25	26	NA	25
C, C-, or lower	7	7	11	6	3	3	8	7	NA	12
Plan Advanced Degree										
Yes	64	73	62	72	82	80	67	69	NA	78
No	36	27	38	28	18	20	33	31	NA	22
Hours/Week on School Work										
Less than 20 hours/week	7	9	8	12	4	4	8	10	NA	16
About 20 hours/week	15	19	19	23	11	14	17	21	NA	23
About 30 hours/week	37	39	39	38	31	36	37	37	NA	32
About 40 hours/week	27	23	23	19	33	31	26	22	NA	19
About 50 hours/week	14	10	11	8	21	15	12	10	NA	10
Hours/Week Spent on Job										
None, not employed	43	47	45	39	34	26	34	33	NA	26
About 10 hours	17	16	14	16	43	50	28	28	NA	9
About 15 hours	14	13	11	13	14	13	13	12	NA	13

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>DUs</i>		<i>CCUs</i>		<i>SLAs</i>		<i>GLAs</i>		<i>URBs</i>	
	<i>80s</i>	<i>90s</i>	<i>80s</i>	<i>90s</i>	<i>80s</i>	<i>90s</i>	<i>80s</i>	<i>90s</i>	<i>80s</i>	<i>90s</i>
About 20 hours	15	14	16	16	7	6	12	13	NA	24
About 30 hours	5	5	6	8	2	3	5	7	NA	12
More than 30 hours	6	5	8	8	0	2	8	7	NA	16
Race/Ethnicity										
American Indian	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	NA	1
Asian or Pacific Islander	6	15	1	1	5	4	2	2	NA	16
Black, African American	5	5	14	8	3	2	3	8	NA	11
Hispanic, Latino	3	4	1	3	1	2	3	2	NA	11
White	85	73	83	83	90	88	90	85	NA	59
Other	0	2	0	2	0	3	0	2	NA	2

Compared with the mid-1980s, student effort in the 1990s was greater in two areas: (a) using athletic and recreational facilities, and (b) writing. These data are not shown in the tables. The increase in effort devoted to writing is consistent with the upward trend in writing gains reported earlier (**Table 1, [End Page 109] Figure 1**). Specifically, the proportions of students writing 10 or more papers during the school year increased about 5% at all institutional types (DUs 27%; CCUs 22%; GLAS 31%), and remained constant at SLAs at about 45%. The proportions writing 10 or more essays were about the same at all institutions. According to **Adelman (1995, 1996)**, students in the 1980s took more writing courses than their counterparts in the 1970s, though many of these courses were “developmental” in nature, designed to help students acquire writing skills needed for acceptable college-level work. This phenomenon is reflected by upticks in the proportions of students responding to CSEQ items dealing with revising papers and asking instructors for advice on writing. At the same time; however, the proportions of students who frequently prepared rough drafts or spent five or more hours on a paper actually decreased (**Kuh, Vesper, Connolly, & Pace, 1997**). Indeed, student effort in most areas was down from mid-1980s levels. For example, the fractions of students devoting at least 40 hours a week to their studies dropped an average of 7% (**Table 2**). This item reflects a combination of the amount of time that students attend class and study, so a typical full-time student (90% of the respondents) spending about 15 hours in class and studying the appropriate amount of time prescribed by faculty (two hours outside of class for every class hour) should devote more than 40 hours per week to academics. Only about a third of the students do so, except at SLAs where almost half exceed 40 hours per week.

Several items from the course learning scale corroborated the diminished effort pattern in that, at all types of institutions, declines of about 10% occurred in the percentages of students indicating they frequently (“often” or “very often”) tried to see how facts and ideas fit together and thought about practical applications of their studies. (This information does not appear in the tables.) On the latter item (practical applications), the greatest drops were at DUs and GLAs, with DUs down 10% (76% to 66%) and GLAs down 15% (77% to 62%). In addition, the proportion of students who frequently draw on information from their readings when talking with peers was down on average about 10%, and a similar though less pronounced trend was apparent in the proportion of students who frequently referred to something their professor said when talking with friends. Finally, the proportion of students reading 10 or more assigned books also decreased about 12% at SLAs, 10% at DUs and CCUs, and 5% at GLAs.

The diminished-effort trend also extended to the formal extracurriculum including participation in campus organizations, student union activities, and so forth. One reason may be that more students are working more hours and, therefore, have less discretionary time to devote to such activities. But employment does not explain the decline in out-of-class involvements at **[End Page 110]** predominantly residential SLAs and GLAs where two-thirds to three-quarters of the students work only 10 or fewer hours per week.

Limitations

This study is limited in several ways. First, it is possible that the CSEQ underestimates the amount of time students devote to learning activities. For example, students increasingly are using technology or participating in class-based cooperative learning activities that are not directly measured. In addition, because different colleges and universities are represented in the various time periods, institutional sampling may affect the results in unknown ways. Also, the trends may not hold for any given institution, or groups of students at a particular college or university, such as honors students. And finally, these findings apply primarily to full-time, traditional-age students, as is the case with most longitudinal studies of undergraduates (**Astin, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 1997**). That is, although respondent characteristics such as age, enrollment status, and residential experience were comparable across the cohorts, the demographic characteristics of undergraduates have changed markedly since the 1960s.

Another concern is whether the responses of students across decades have the same meaning. Writing is a case in point. Perhaps the increase in proportions of students reporting substantial gains is artificially inflated due to floor effects. That is, compared with previous cohorts, more students in the 1990s start college with less well developed writing skills and, therefore, a larger fraction say they have substantially gained in this area because they had considerable improvement to make in order to become minimally competent. In other words, “substantial progress” in the minds of today’s students may be comparable to what students of a decade or two ago might have considered little progress.

Conclusions and Implications

The results point to four major conclusions. First, substantial fractions of students (more than half to as many as four-fifths) make substantial progress in many areas considered vital to living a self-sufficient, civically responsible, and economically productive life after college. These areas include intellectual and communication skills (synthesis, analysis, writing, self-directed learning), personal and social development skills (understanding self and others, being able to function as a team member), and vocational training. Second, the proportions of students reporting substantial progress in several areas traditionally considered the domain of general education (e.g., appreciation and understanding of literature, the arts, science, **[End Page 111]** values development) have decreased since 1969. Third, compared with their counterparts of a decade ago, students in the 1990s devote less effort to activities related to learning and personal development. Finally, despite lower levels of effort, students are getting higher grades as the fraction of college students reporting B+ or better grades is now at an all-time high. The direction of these trends is consistent for all institutional types, though in some instances the magnitudes differ slightly.

Taken together, these results provide a mixed review for the quality of undergraduate education in the 1990s. On the one hand, comparable proportions of students make substantial progress in certain areas as in the 1960s: critical thinking, preparation for advanced study, general knowledge of a variety of fields, and understanding and getting along with others. And in some other important areas, such as writing, vocational preparation, and ability to function as a team member, greater proportions of students in the 1990s say they have gained substantially. However, in the case of writing, this does not necessarily mean that the quality of writing in the 1990s is superior to that produced by earlier cohorts. While the fraction of students reporting substantial progress in vocational preparation is higher than in 1969, the increase occurred during the 1970s and has since leveled off, even though record numbers of students say they are attending college primarily to obtain a good job.

In other important areas, students in the 1990s are benefitting less from college than previous cohorts. General education may not be the cultural wasteland some believe it to be (**Bloom, 1987; Cheney, 1989**), but there is ample cause for concern as the fractions of students who report gaining very little in their familiarity with literature, arts, and science are almost a third—an alarmingly high number. Process indicators from other studies such as the National Longitudinal Study of the Class of 1972 and the High School and Beyond offer a partial explanation in that students in the 1980s took fewer courses in these areas compared with students in the 1970s (**Adelman, 1995**). That is, students are not gaining as much in science and literature because they are not studying these subjects to the same extent as earlier cohorts.

Also disconcerting are the gradual declines since the 1980s in such areas as awareness of different cultures, personal development, and values development. Understanding and getting along with others are competencies that have never been more important, yet the proportions of students in the mid-1990s reporting substantial progress in these areas are down from the high levels established in the early 1980s. Even though these declines are modest in magnitude, they are nonetheless troubling because they have occurred during a period when universities have made concerted efforts to **[End Page 112]** help students understand and appreciate diversity in the human experience.

In short, the calls for reforming undergraduate education in the 1980s and beyond seem to have been justified. Although the quality of undergraduate education has not declined as much as some critics contend, both gains measures and process indicators such as the quality of effort (activities) scales indicate that reform efforts may have had some modest, positive effects. For example, in areas considered important for success after college—communication skills (writing), working in teams, learning on one’s own, and vocational preparation—the proportions of students reporting substantial gains are at or close to the high-water marks since 1969.

Shapiro’s (1997) trenchant insights into the present condition of undergraduate education are instructive. Fueling the current perception of low quality in undergraduate education is that this aspect of the university has not improved as quickly or responded as successfully to the needs of society as faculty efforts in research. While agreeing that improvement is needed, Shapiro asserts that undergraduate education has never been better than at present, all things considered. Moreover, he contends that quality is most appropriately judged by the extent to which undergraduate programs are responding adequately to civic needs, which is the rubric used in the past to evaluate the quality of undergraduate education. That is,

the transformation of the undergraduate curriculum from one era to another was seldom a case of good triumphing over evil or of a more powerful educational ideology replacing a less forceful one. More often . . . the most important changes were inspired by new societal needs.

(p. 71)

At the same time, contemporary undergraduates are shortchanging themselves by not devoting as much effort to the activities that matter to their education as did their counterparts of a decade ago. Equally troubling, they are being shortchanged by their teachers. That is, it appears that faculty are contributing to the diminished-effort phenomenon by asking less from students in return for higher grades. Since 1990 the percentage of college freshmen reporting A-grades the previous year (for the vast majority this means the senior year of high school) increased by nearly 50% (**Astin, 1997**). This entitlement expectation carries over to college as record numbers of freshmen say they will make at least a “B” average and graduate with honors (**Astin, 1997**). Student culture is surely a mediating factor in the amount of effort students put forth, as always (**Horowitz, 1987**); that is, returning students “teach” new students how much academic effort is required to get by. That students are getting higher grades for lower levels of effort suggests that a tacit agreement has been struck between faculty and students in the form of a disengagement compact: “You leave me alone, and I’ll leave you **[End Page 113]** alone” (**Kuh et al., 1991**). The faculty side is not requiring too much from students in terms of reading and written work in exchange for a decent grade—at least a B—provided that students don’t make a fuss about the class or ask for too many meetings outside of class or too many comments from faculty on students’ written work or exams. Many students are willing to uphold their end of the deal.

Corroboration for this interpretation comes from many quarters (**Kennedy, 1997; Sacks, 1996; Shapiro, 1997**). Even such selective, affluent residential liberal arts colleges as Kenyon are affected, as **Kluge (1993)** laments:

Faculty have been encouraged to remove themselves, to disengage somewhat from a full, complete, intense commitment to students. . . . We're teaching less, there's less emphasis on faculty keeping office hours and attending meetings, more celebration of publication and other accomplishments. Students are aware of that, aware of it when you go from asking for four papers to asking for one, aware of it when you go from ten office hours a week to two. That suggests disengagement.

(p. 38)

More evidence comes from our (**Kuh & Vesper, 1997**) study of student exposure to three best practices in undergraduate education: faculty-student interaction, peer cooperation, and active learning (**Chickering & Gamson, 1987**). After controlling for student background characteristics, perceptions of the institutional environment, and general education gains, student engagement between 1990 and 1994 increased only in student-faculty interaction and only at small colleges (SLAs, GLAs). At doctoral-granting universities the trends were in the opposite direction, toward less student-faculty interaction and less active learning.

The disengagement trend is mirrored in downward trends in personal development and values gains, suggesting a diminishing influence of higher education on personal development. Understanding self and others and being knowledgeable about different cultures and ways of life are essential to functioning effectively in a diverse society. Several years ago the **Wingspread Group (1993)** challenged higher education to give more attention to values. But between 1989 and 1995, faculty became less interested in the development of their students' values (**Sax, Astin, Arredondo, & Korn, 1996**). Are faculty members unwitting players in a silent tragedy, the erosion of higher education's commitment to students' personal development?

One explanation of the disengagement trend is the system of graduate school socialization and institutional rewards that compels faculty members to devote considerable time to research, even though they may prefer teaching (**Sax et al., 1996**). Time is finite; the more time devoted to scholarly **[End Page 114]** activities the less that can be allocated to undergraduate instruction, broadly defined. Another equally pernicious but infrequently discussed trend that may contribute to disengagement is the increasing reliance on part-time faculty in undergraduate programs. Given the importance of faculty-student interaction to many desired outcomes of college, it stands to reason that student effort will decline if faculty effort also declines. Part-time faculty understandably have less time to devote to various class-related activities, such as holding office hours, meeting with students outside of class, or advising student groups. Perhaps full-time and part-time faculty induce differential levels of student effort, resulting in differential gains by students. Thus, the greater the fraction of part-time faculty, the lower the amount of student effort across the range of activities that matter.

Implications

Students learn what they study. Thus, the most obvious and immediate implication of these findings is that institutional improvement efforts must be redoubled, especially those focusing on areas considered foundational to general and liberal education, such as science, literature, and the arts. By softening requirements in these areas, higher education has reaped what it sowed: students who acquire less knowledge in these areas than earlier cohorts. Simply instituting a longer list of required courses is not a promising solution, however, even if it could be orchestrated. Whatever strategies may be used to reverse the downward trend in proportions of students reporting progress in these areas, an intermediate step is needed: rethinking what constitutes liberal education in the present context. **Shapiro's (1997)** view merits consideration:

While the concept of a liberal education continues to reign as an article of faith . . . it often masks many important differences in educational philosophies and objectives. Perhaps our chief folly . . . has been to shape our rhetoric as if there were no history of change and controversy on these issues and only one proper curriculum for everyone. There has never been a “right” curriculum. . . . A liberal education needs to prepare all thoughtful citizens for an independent and responsible life of choice that appreciates the connectedness of things and peoples. This involves the capacity to make moral and/or political choices that will give our individual and joint lives greater and more complete meaning, an understanding of how the world works, the capacity to distinguish between logical and illogical arguments, and an understanding of the inevitability of diversity. . . . It would also be helpful if a liberal education encouraged and enabled students to distinguish between self interest and community interest, between sentimentality and careful thought, between learning and imagination, and between the power and limitations of knowledge.

(pp. 88–90) [End Page 115]

The accelerating rate of change and increasing complexity of postmodern life demands that higher education focus on cultivating deep (as contrasted with) surface learning. The familiar surface learning approach is characterized by information recall. In contrast, learners who use a deep approach “seek meaning in study, reflect on what they read and hear, and undertake to create (or re-create) their personal understanding of things” (Marchese, 1997, p. 88). If deep learning and associated intellectual skills (analysis, synthesis, self-directed learning) are more a function of instructional approach than learner disposition (Marchese, 1997), one inescapable conclusion is that faculty are key actors in helping students cultivate such competencies. This means that faculty will have to devote more effort than at present to such activities, at least in the short term.

Finer-grain analyses are needed to determine if the diminution of effort and gains is universal or whether it is specific to certain groups of students, major fields, and institutions. It would be especially instructive if we could integrate effort and outcomes data with course-taking patterns in those areas typically considered general education. In addition, studies are needed to discover the effects of participation in remedial courses and distance education on effort and gains. At some colleges and universities, students perform at levels (both effort and gains) that exceed the predictions of traditional input measures. Among these high-performing colleges are certain HBCUs and Involving Colleges (Fleming, 1984; Kuh et al., 1991). If this is still the case, what can be learned from them with regard to intentional efforts to induce higher levels of student effort and improve learning?

In part, student effort is down, especially in educationally purposeful out-of-class activities, because smaller proportions of undergraduates today experience what was in the past called “college life”—full-time study in residence which, according to Menand, provides “leisure for scholarly pursuits” (p. 49). This kind of educational environment is replete with learning opportunities such as accessible faculty, playing fields, libraries, concert halls, and peers from different backgrounds who are difficult to avoid and whose presence in dorms, dining halls, and classes challenge one’s values and world view. In relative terms, opportunities for serendipitous campus-based learning beyond the classroom is substantially attenuated for the majority of undergraduates today.

This does not necessarily mean that student development must be unavoidably blunted, as there are plenty of similar challenges to be faced off-campus in jobs, community agencies, families, churches, and so forth. What it does mean is that the curriculum becomes an even more important organizing framework for learning and personal development—at least the chunk for which colleges and universities can assume responsibility. Faculty typically ignore a powerful lever for learning: whether students use [End Page 116] ideas introduced in their classes in their lives outside the classroom. It is now clear that students are more likely to learn at deeper levels when they apply what they are studying in different venues in the company of peers who share a similar intellectual experience. Creating educational environments that induce such behavior requires focused, collaborative efforts by faculty, instructional designers, student affairs professionals, and others.

A Final Word

Pundits are fond of using the familiar A through F grading scheme to evaluate the performance of the American educational system. Based on the results of this study, what grade accurately represents the quality of the undergraduate experience in the United States? Given that less than 75% of seniors in the 1990s reported substantial gains in most areas, a C grade for higher education seems warranted. If we assign a series of grades to account for different aspects of the complicated, multifaceted nature of the undergraduate experience in such domains as vocational preparation, critical thinking, and self-directed learning, then higher education deserves at least a B, inasmuch as the performance of colleges and universities as reflected by student reports of their gains is comparable to that of the 1960s. But in science, literature, and the arts, it's hard to justify anything higher than a D. With regard to effort, neither students nor institutions have earned anything better than a C. This level of effort falls well short of the collective commitment to excellence our students and nation need and deserve.

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