

SOME RADICAL PROPOSALS
TO RAISE HIGHER EDUCATION HIGHER

by Lyle Owen

Professor of Economics
University of Tulsa

While the students are here with us, in their years among the ivy and the elms, the sages and the books, we try to do something for them, and that is as it should be. But maybe we ought also to ease their exits and their entrances.

There is surplus room on our campus during each summer session, and this should permit us to be freer and experimental about freshman entrance then. Why not, as a summertime alternative mode of getting into college, allow anyone to take the beginning courses without all the formal folderol of college entrance -- just to try it if he wishes, without entrance testing (intelligence or otherwise) or proof of high school record, or interviews or age minimum or anything, except desire and the tuition? If during that summer session he makes C or better in 2 "solid" courses, he (or she) is admitted for the fall and after.

This might be known as a "by their fruit ye shall know them" entrance policy, and has had a certain merit, as well as approval from on high, ever since antiquity. Year after year, at the fall faculty meeting and otherwise, we sitting savants have been told that the students our admissions office lets in are getting better and better. I have never been able to see it. The main item of evidence offered is apparently a slow creep upward in the scores on the college entrance tests. Perhaps this is too impressionistic, but my own years-long observation, first as a student myself, then a teacher elsewhere, and latterly as one of the local illuminators of

the youth, has been the same yesterday, today, and probably forever: that some of our students are so bright, so industrious, so well prepared by things like their own reading and thinking, that it almost embarrasses the teacher to offer himself as their educator; and most are in between; and many astonish at the other end. All of these performances have always been present in my experience, and I can't see that their proportions have changed. This in spite of all the entrance rigamarole of testing, etc., and more etc.

I want it clearly understood that some of my best friends are admissions officers. I am not at all (at least as yet) proposing their total unemployment. I just want them to have the summer off. Why shouldn't they, like professors, have long vacations? Then they can come back refreshed, to test and interview, and play with immense piles of data, all interspersed with listening to coach and parental pleas. They could then have fun and maybe do some good the other 9 months of the year. But for the summer, when there is empty space, we could try open admission, and observe the fruit thereof.

Having clarified college entrance, I now move on to the matter of course withdrawals and the final departure, otherwise known as graduation. In recent months our university senate and our various college faculties have looked at the strangeness and inequities of our quaint withdrawal policy, whereunder, among other oddities, the same student with the same status will from one class withdraw in tranquility and in the other bite the bitter dust, with an F recorded imperishably.

Our university senate, made up of teaching faculty, students, and administrators, voted in May of 1972 to recommend to the consideration of the faculties of our various colleges the establishment of a new rule permitting

a student to withdraw freely from any course, at any time within the semester, without academic penalty. That is to say, presumably the beleaguered scholar, at any time before the final examination if there is one (or some similar end cutoff date) could withdraw -- and no F.

The Engineering faculty voted 30 to 12 to permit such free withdrawal. But the College of Business faculty (of which I have the honor to be a member) turned down this humane measure 15 to 6. I might add that I voted in the minority, but that has happened before.

I was not really too surprised at the way this vote went, since I've occasionally before seen the Business faculty vote against progress, during my many years of patiently watching their struggle upward. But it was a matter of great grief to me, a blow of the first magnitude, that the intellectual leadership of this unhappy action was by a colleague who usually is on the side of the truth and the light, an economist who has long used his redoubtable gifts of persuasion, parliamentary maneuver, and rolling oratory to battle for the verities. I must of course not identify him, but he is a tall spare man who walks around with an innocent face, with something behind that of the wily coyote, a silvered fox who has an astonishing memory, and grasp of all needed detail -- the whole fortified by a tighter squeeze on Robert's Rules of Order (latest edition) than Robert himself managed. I have long admired this professor for the extraordinary clarity of his arguments and his mind. On most issues over the years he has been clearly right. Occasionally, as in the present sad instance of failing to change the university's withdrawal policy, he is clearly wrong. But he is always clear.

Really, I think the proposed new withdrawal policy, rational and humane as it is, is too conservative. I favor it, but I would go further. I'd not only let the poor student wretch, who has already lost time and money in the course, withdraw from it without penalty, but I'd even say, if he sticks in the course and ends with an F -- forget it. This would prevent his being penalized for deciding to stick it out and try, in spite of his dubious situation, instead of seeking safety by withdrawal before the final.

Indeed, I wouldn't record any F's for anybody. This would give the registrar more vacation time, as I have already proposed for the university admissions officers. Why not record only the passing grades, from D's on up to the splendid A's, and then, when our student has accumulated the needed 130 hours or so, with a C average, put our blessing on him and anoint him Artium Baccalaureus? The rest would be forgotten. And why require transcripts from the other colleges where he failed? Let them be sent only at his option, if he wants transfer credit therefrom.

In all these respects my improved policy would be even better than that of Heaven, for it is said that sins are written in scarlet Up There and the recording angel forgetteth not.

One can of course imagine a horrible case -- or is it really such in view of the messiness of all our lives? -- where Joe Bilsudski, after attempting 300 semester hours over a painful 15 years, flunks 170 of them but finally reaches the needed 130. I am not worried about that, and am willing to take the chance. After all, these are experimental times, and new winds are a-blowing.