



Addressing a Wide Range of Learners

An article published in the Garden Island Newspaper on April 28, 2001 by William Rusher is followed by an editorial response by QWERTY founder, Mark Carey, published several days later. Mr. Rusher feels that our brightest students are being "shafted" by changing standards; Mark Carey disagrees with his reasoning.

Smart Students Get Shafted

by William Rusher

The rush is on to claim "victim" status these days, because few roles in American society are so richly rewarded. There is one group of true victims, however, who are being overlooked—partly because they have failed to organize and proclaim their victimhood, and partly because we feel uneasy admitting their existence. They are the above-average students in America's schools.

Of course, in Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegone, all the students are above average. But in the real world, only 50 percent of any group of students occupies the right half of the Bell curve, and they are being dangerously short-changed by our current education policies.

The trouble began after World War II, when the GI Bill of Rights heavily overloaded America's colleges and universities with the applications of veterans who wanted a college education. The GI Bill was a splendid idea, and unquestionably was of enormous benefit to many bright young people who could never have afforded college on their own. But not even an act of Congress could make every young American intellectually capable of earning a legitimate college degree, even if there had been room for everyone who applied.

So two things happened: New colleges, including community colleges, sprang up all over the place like dandelions after a spring rain. They took on the task of instructing those who could not gain admission to existing institutions. And both the existing colleges and the new ones began quietly "dumbing down" their curricula to a point where all, or a least most, of those admitted could pass the exams.

Once consequence has been that there are now millions of Americans walking around with college degrees that testify to an education not much better than they could have acquired at a good public high school or prep school in the years before the war. Another consequence, less visible but infinitely more harmful to this country in the long run, is that other millions of Americans who could have mastered (and benefited from) a more demanding curriculum have been forced to feed on the same academic oatmeal and mush as their less-talented brothers and sisters. They will go through life without ever having been exposed to literature that would have thrilled them; to scientific course that would have sharpened their minds and vastly expanded their knowledge; to foreign languages that would have opened who new areas of culture to their delighted exploration.

Why do you suppose colleges are offering course credit for such new specialties as gay studies, feminist issues, and basket weaving in the Upper Amazon? No doubt the delicious novelty of such "subjects" plays a part, but the truth is that many of the students who take them are simply too dumb to pass what used to be typical college course in chemistry, Latin or differential calculus.

Of course, some of the very brightest students-identified by their SAT scores-can count on being snapped up by one of the relative handful of college that is still dispensing a legitimate education. But not even a good SAT score may be of much help if the student has the bad luck to be white or Asian. So they settle for the best education they can get-and of that, all too often, the less said the better.

America will pay dearly for this neglect of its brightest students. We must make sure that "Leave no child behind" doesn't turn into "Let no child race ahead."

William Rusher is a Distinguished Fellow of the Claremont Institute for the Study of Statesmanship and Political Philosophy.

A response in the form of a Letter to the Editor of The Garden Island newspaper:

Dear Editor:

William Rusher's Viewpoint (April 28), "Smart Students Get Shafted," speaks out regarding his perceived neglect of bright students, asserting that colleges have watered down curriculum to justify diplomas for undeserving students. He believes that, as a result, America suffers from "dumbed-down" education. Maintaining high education standards is important, but selecting appropriate standards and valid measures of them is even more so. Rusher's emphasis on the SAT as an instrument or the Bell curve as a standard to define a "bright" student, and indeed his entire view of what is important in education, is painfully narrow-minded.

Rusher stresses the significance of only a small range of analytic intelligence, or traditional school curricula, but contemporary understanding of intelligence is more comprehensive. He does not acknowledge the value of creative talent, including such abilities as artistic expression or divergent thinking. He doesn't mention a variety of practical aptitudes and skills, including "street smarts," communication facility, and emotional wisdom. It is the students who develop abilities in multiple aspects of "intelligence" and who learn how and when to apply them that are bound for success and satisfaction in life. The analytic programmer who can design logical circuitry but can't communicate his ideas, the creative artist who sculpts brilliantly but can't market her work, and the practical fisherman who knows every nuance of the sea but lacks a creative outlet for downtime may be victims of poor educational leadership more than the "smart" students that Rusher is concerned about.

Colleges don't offer Gay Studies simply so people can learn to do drag, Feminist Issues is not a major just for women to share their feelings, and a course in basket-weaving in the Upper Amazon is not the equivalent of occupational therapy in a mental institution. Non-traditional curricula serve to enrich our culture by bringing together minds and ideas for greater understanding of important human experience in a world that is more complex and rich than was recognized when the traditional standards that Rusher embraces were put on a pedestal. The elitist value that only certain students are capable or worthy of mastering a specific, standard curriculum is terribly limited; it is of far greater importance to strive to maximize each student's potential using a broad-based curriculum and educational approaches. Leadership that acknowledges and fosters a wide range of learning styles supporting intellectual diversity, creative expression, and practical capabilities will go much further to reduce "victims" in our schools than raising "standards" as Rusher suggests, and that leadership is needed not at the college level but in the very earliest years of education.