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Students, Careers, and the Recession

College and university faculties properly are concerned about their responsibilities to their students, to their disciplines and professions, and to the social, economic, and intellectual health of the larger society.

As part of those responsibilities, some faculty members feel they should restrict students from entering programs of study preparatory for careers where prevailing estimates indicate that potential job opportunities are limited and diminishing. Other faculty members feel they should provide students with the best advice available about potential employment opportunities and, having done so, should offer students maximum freedom of choice to pursue the various instructional programs in our institutions of higher education.

I join the latter group for two reasons. First, our record in predicting specialized manpower requirements has been too poor to justify using such prognostications as a basis for preventing men and women from entering careers of their choice. Second, and more importantly, in a free and open society it should not be a responsibility of colleges and universities to police the entry of individuals into various careers.

It should be the responsibility of colleges and universities to make higher education maximally available. That responsibility should include advising students about employment opportunities in different fields. But it should not include denial of the opportunity to pursue a student's chosen area of study. An important but different consideration is that there is an advantage to the broad society in having persons trained in one field work with persons trained in another, for that condition ameliorates the potential isolation of specialized elites.

Since there are practical limits to the number of persons our universities can instruct and the number of programs our universities can offer, restrictions on enrollments in programs are often necessary. Such restrictions should not be based on faculty estimates of future manpower needs. They should be based on the availability of qualified students and faculty, views of the missions of the institution, cost benefits of various programs, and other considerations related to academic affairs and their support.

These two contrasting points of view are not novel. I raise them at this time because the issue is exacerbated during a recession. At present, beyond demographic and other factors, the recession is contributing to (i) a reduction in job opportunities and (ii) a largely unanticipated increase in overall college and university enrollments. Hence the issue is thrown into bolder relief (more students and fewer jobs) and the dilemma will be more pressing each day the recession continues.

Under such conditions, persons of good will must feel it wrong to provide individuals with professional preparation for careers for which few openings are expected to occur. Yet other persons of good will must feel it wrong to deprive individuals of the chance to compete for those few openings by denying them the opportunity to acquire the necessary academic preparation.

In a democracy committed to educational opportunity for all, the balance must lie on the side of keeping the doors of higher education open as wide as possible, consistent with quality instruction. Our young people should have full access to the potential job opportunities, be they few or many. To close certain of those doors as a response to an estimated reduction in specific manpower needs would mean that our colleges and universities were assuming the roles of agents for a controlled society.—ARNOLD B. GROBMAN, *Special Assistant to the President, University of Illinois, Box 4348, Chicago 60680*