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## Can Meritocracy in Academe Be Saved?

Isn't it curious that anti-intellectualism is so common among educators? I refer to the dismal ebbing of standards that we have permitted to occur at all levels of American education, especially during the last decade and a half. Intent, rather than performance, is now so well rewarded that the most common grade given in many of our universities is an A. Full credit can be obtained even though nothing may have been learned and no intellectual growth attained. Courses such as candle making, yoga, and fly fishing often carry the same college credit as quantum mechanics, cell physiology, and physical chemistry.

The Superintendent of Schools for Hawaii announced that a diploma should be given on attendance—only. When a guerrilla group of educators returned a county school system in Virginia to a promotion on achievement only basis, shocked newsmen called it a "new idea" and "an experiment," and reported that educators from all over the country were seeking information about this innovative program. The once great City College of New York, which for 54 years produced more graduates who went on to earn doctorates than all but one other American college, dropped all entrance standards in 1969. Now, in a struggle to regain some of what they voluntarily gave away, they demand from entrants a ninth grade ability in math. Clearly, the professionalism is gone from our profession. To rectify our follies and restore the public's confidence in us are our most pressing tasks today.

One way to restore our credibility is to reverse grade inflation—a sickness that has reached epidemic proportions. For the past 15 years, as Scholastic Aptitude Test scores have steadily fallen, the number of high grades given in virtually every university in the country has steadily increased. The eclipse of excellence in education is widely recognized and universally criticized (often in cartoon form) by responsible journalists. This false certification in individual classrooms culminates in the graduation of uneducated students from arts and science programs and nonjourneymen from professional schools. Armed with only leatherette sheepskins, many cannot hold down jobs "reserved" for graduates. The truly worthy graduates—whose grades are often indistinguishable from those of the inept—are disillusioned when prospective employers are unimpressed with their credentials.

News stories call attention to the poor job market for college graduates and the number of graduates working in positions previously filled by people who had not attended college. In how many of these cases is the mismatch between the graduate and the diploma, rather than the graduate and the job? We have already transferred some of our responsibility to postgraduate employers and to the school of hard knocks. Unless we reverse this trend, even more of our graduates will have to be evaluated by business and government tests before they—and we—are certified competent. Businesses are already spending millions to provide the training that we have failed to give their work force. Although our students are not receiving failing grades, we are.

The most important task ahead for all educators is that of reinstating standards and reestablishing credibility with the public. Accomplishing the former will result in the latter. Of all the academic disciplines, the sciences and engineering have relaxed their standards the least. It is logical then that this group could most easily become the initiating force in an effort to restore an academic meritocracy. I hope that in every academic institution a few scientists will rise and lead the rest of their colleagues in returning integrity to pedagogy.—JOHN D. PALMER, *Chairman, Department of Zoology, University of Massachusetts, Amherst 01003*