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SCIENCE

Open Admissions: The Real Issue

When the City University of New York announced late in 1969 that it would admit all 1970 graduates from city high schools, an intensive controversy about "open admissions" was set off. What was largely overlooked by those on both sides of the debate was that several of the largest state systems of higher education have been operating under such a policy for many years. As other states and municipalities expand their higher educational facilities, open admissions as such will probably become a dead issue.

Indeed, the real issue all along has been not *who* gets in, but who gets in *where*. This question is particularly sensitive in those cities or states that have a hierarchical arrangement of institutions, whereby only the most able students may attend a few select colleges or universities, while the least able are shunted to junior or community colleges. This arrangement, which evolved within the private sector more or less by accident, has been adopted by some public systems (notably California) as a matter of policy, and now many states seem to be drifting toward some kind of hierarchical model. In the minds of many planners, the two-year college is appealing not only because it preserves and protects the selectivity of institutions at the top of the hierarchy but also because it is generally cheaper to operate.

Those who support the idea of keeping the least able students in separate institutions argue that it enhances the educational development of both the bright and the dull student. So far, the empirical evidence has failed to support this contention. It *is* clear, however, that such sorting of students has a number of unfortunate side effects, the most obvious being racial and socioeconomic segregation. For this reason, if for no other, the trend toward uncritical acceptance of the hierarchical model is to be deplored.

The idea that a previously selective college will be "wrecked" (as was recently alleged in one nationally syndicated column) if it moves to accept mediocre or poorly prepared applicants is simply not supported by the facts. For many years, a few of the country's major public universities have, apparently without suffering ill effects, been able to accommodate students who vary widely in ability. The transition from selective to open admissions will, no doubt, require certain curricular changes, but it can be done, although a long history of predictive studies shows that it would be folly to expect the student with relatively poor high school grades and low test scores to perform as well as the better-prepared students in the same courses. In certain respects, this would be like requiring the typical new freshman to take senior-level courses and expecting him to do as well as the seniors.

There are, of course, many structural models other than the hierarchical or vertical one that could and should be explored (a horizontal arrangement of institutions differentiated along curricular lines, for example). However, as institutional administrators and planners continue to scramble for limited funds, they are likely to pay less and less attention to the matter of alternative structures. This is not to suggest that new institutional forms will not be tried out (the "university without walls," for example), but that the existing hierarchical arrangement within state or city systems will be perpetuated and strengthened and that innovative forms will be merely added, like so much decorative gingerbread, to the main structure.—ALEXANDER W. ASTIN, *American Council on Education, Washington, D.C. 20036*