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Career Choices

In attempting to make good choices in preparing for a career, students have always faced uncertainties. Part of these have been within themselves; for example, questions of aptitudes, interest, and determination. Others have been external—questions of future opportunities to do significant work and the likely availability of employment. Mechanisms for helping students meet the internal uncertainties are still primitive, but they are far more effective than methods of providing guidance for the future. Two of the major sources of guidance have been defective. One of these is the departmental faculty advisers, who too often have advocated specialization in their own disciplines and discouraged broad preparation.

More serious are the mistakes that students often make when they try to use their own judgment in the search for future significance. Their common error is to assume that the challenge of the moment will be enduring. For example, in the early 1960's the mass media emphasized the potential of the space program. Many students accordingly prepared themselves for careers as space scientists and engineers. Later there was a smaller, but no less influential, exaggeration of opportunities in oceanography. In 1965, the Stratton Commission recommended that the federal government spend $2 billion yearly in support of oceanography. Expectations were aroused both among students and in industry. The principal catch has been disappointment.

At the moment, we seem to be setting the scene for a fresh set of disappointments, this time around environmental concerns.

On many campuses across the nation, special courses, curricula, and institutes have been organized, in part to meet student demands and in part to channel students into environmental studies. Obviously it is desirable that students should be well informed about the environment. However, faculties should be cautious about encouraging students to believe that many job opportunities are likely to be available in that field.

A survey of major industrial companies indicates that they are devoting considerable attention and money to abating pollution. However, many students have already been discouraged, when they realized that they are more interested in potentially rewarding careers in “pure” science. In 1965, the Stratton Commission recommended that the federal government spend $2 billion yearly in support of oceanography. Expectations were aroused both among students and in industry. The principal catch has been disappointment.

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