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Higher Education: Who Needs It?

In the general run of human activity currently there seems to be a pervasive idea, adhered to by many but perhaps not really accepted, that given time and effort anyone can master anything of an intellectual nature. Thus, the concept of elitism in education has become almost obsolete. It has come to be associated with a high position in society, being better born, rich, and so on. The idea that one individual may be better endowed than another for a particular function or pursuit has remained respectable only in some less essential, although not less interesting, areas such as sports and entertainment.

Few would disagree that, for some, no amount of training would enable them to perform some physical feat such as lifting a 500-pound weight off the floor. Why then is there a general belief that equal mastery of educational course material by all is possible? This is not to say that there are not differences in learning rates. Such differences are certainly the basis for the self-paced method of instruction, which has proved reasonably successful in some areas. Nevertheless, it is recognizing the obvious to say that we do not all develop the same capacity in all endeavors, even though we may be given the opportunity to do so.

Given that there is a natural range of intellectual as well as physical abilities, why do we persist in trying to diminish or even eliminate elitism in education? Why persist in the fiction that exposure to certain types of developed understanding beneficial to a few is of more than passing interest to most? Indeed in some areas like quantum electrodynamics we do not subscribe to this idea, but in many more common ones we do and insist that all of us can attain uniform intellectual skills.

Perhaps this current obsession, the taint of elitism, stems from two attitudes based on experiences of the past. One of these is that the mere acquisition of a certificate of exposure to education has made some feel superior, wrongly of course. The other is generated by the previously demonstrable fact that white collar skills were more highly paid than blue-collar skills, which is no longer true.

If the experiences of the past no longer hold true, why do we cling to the beliefs which sprang from them? It does not follow that making maximum use of those most talented in intellectual pursuits demeans the rest of us. If we applaud the identification and careful nurturing of the talented performer, why not that of the talented mind? The difficulty may be that our dissonant musical notes are readily recognized and accepted, but our inability to master mathematics is not. It is too easy to ascribe limited intellectual ability in one or another area to lack of interest.

This position does not lead to a negative attitude toward equal educational opportunity nor to the attitude that the intellectually able in one field are socially better or generally wiser. It does say that talented individuals are not too plentiful and that talent should be nourished where it appears. In other words, it is unwise to disregard the real differences in intellectual capabilities, both for the individual and for society.

This argument leads inevitably to the conclusion that not all are equally educable. But it also leads to the proposition that that form of training does not necessarily produce wiser or nobler individuals.

So recognize elitism in education for what it is: the opportunity for creative individuals to pursue intellectual goals and ideals somewhat beyond the boundaries confining many of us. If we destroy this environment of creative endeavor, whether it be scientific, artistic, or literary, we will have lost a great gift for humanity.—NORMAN HACKERMAN, *President, Rice University, Houston, Texas 77001*