

# EVALUATION of the

Evaluation at the University  
As a Step in the Learning  
Process, Yes!

As a Method of Coercing and  
Culling Students, No!

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Conventional systems of evaluation and grading at the university

university increasingly are under attack by student and faculty critics. After considerable soul-searching during the past several years, in the process of which I jettisoned some notions about evaluation once firmly taken for granted, I have evolved three hypotheses.

My first hypothesis is that evaluation by some qualified person other than the learner himself is a useful, but probably not essential, stage in the learning process, provided it is private, informal, non-competitive, non-coercive, non-punitive, and non-threatening to the learner's personality. However, I believe that for some people self-evaluation by someone else.

My second hypothesis is that present systems of university evaluation generally in use, involving numerical and letter grades, grade point indexes, class ranks, and similar invidious distinctions; grades derived from mandatory examinations, quizzes, research papers and essays, and other criteria arbitrarily imposed upon students by university rules and professorial whims; grades permanently recorded in bureaucratic files open to public inspection, not only do not contribute to the educational process, but weaken, debase, and discredit it.

My third hypothesis is that the existing system of university evaluation and grading, as well as the sifting and grading process in the lower schools upon which it builds, is not primarily intended to serve an educational purpose but rather is aimed chiefly at, in the words of social anthropologist David Riesman, "servicing the status hierarchy and providing graded access to 'achievement' and power in the social system." Schools, colleges, and universities have become the agencies in modern technocratic society through which persons are selected for occupational roles and their life chances

are largely determined.

I shall elaborate on these three hypotheses in reverse order.

Defenders of the traditional systems of higher education in North America and Europe, in which formal evaluation and punitive grading constitutes an integral part, are naturally reluctant to concede that the educational role of universities may to a considerable degree be an elaborate charade to disguise more controversial functions. Although university-sponsored research into this subject has understandably been sparse, there have been numerous social critics during the past half century who have endorsed this hypothesis and there is now a growing body of empirical evidence to support it, some of it accumulated by New Left sociologists and anthropologists, some by more conventional investigators.

This body of evidence and commentary supports the common sense proposition, to which almost all of us unreflectingly subscribe, that economic and social success and rewards in modern technocratic society are heavily dependent upon the formal credentials of higher education. To quote one behavioral scientist, Patricia S. West, "a college degree has become simply a badge of eligibility for the Twentieth Century white collar world."

This statement expresses a truism and greatly oversimplifies the reality. It is not merely the university degree itself but the institution granting it one's rank among those receiving it that pretty much determine the socio-economic track one sets out upon after graduation and the probable hierarchical level one will reach at the end of this path. We do not need behavioral scientists to tell us that in Canada and the United States some universities have greater repute than others and that in the case of less prestigious institutions, most of the graduates have to be content with middle ranking positions, or lower, in the professional, managerial, and technological hierarchies. It is these lesser universities and colleges that turn out the "standardized specialists... mediocre technicians... and pretentious mediocrities" mordantly, and perhaps unfairly, described by the late Harvard sociologist Pitirim Sorokin.

In the less reputable universities especially, but to a lesser degree also in

the elite institutions, the grading system sifts and selects personnel. The honors graduate of a minor university has a chance to be admitted to a prestige graduate or professional school and thereby to join a higher socio-economic track than if mediocre grades had condemned him to a career of school teaching, government clerking, or management of a small business. Similarly



for the top-ranking alumnus of the famous university law school there awaits a junior partnership in a great urban law firm, starting salary \$15,000. while for the middle ranking graduate there is a government attorney's job worth only \$8,000. to betin with.

These are facts of life with which we are all familiar, and they explain why grades are viewed with such deadly seriousness by most university students. In the United States university, grades until recently, have quite literally been matter of life and death for some students, with lush graduate shcool fellowships reserved for some, death in Korea or Vietnam for others.

Professors Cicourel and Kituse, in a study of educational bureaucracies, describe this culling func-

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