

# UNIVERSITY

tion of universities as the "cooling out" process. An apparatus of records, grades, and interviews with university counselors and professors is utilized over a four or five year period to select the distinguished, the mediocre, and the failures, to condition the less successful to a more or less cheerful acceptance of their lot, and --through a mechanism that can only be compared to Communist brainwashing--to

society where there are many competitors for middle and upper level ranks, rewards, and responsibilities. I strongly disagree. In my judgment this use of grades for an ostensibly educational but actually punitive function is socially disorganizing, psychologically alienating, and morally evil. As Sorokin says, it "mishapes the minds, and distorts the souls" of those whom it touches.

No one has summed up the matter better than the inimitable Thorstein Veblen when half a century ago he wrote that higher education has become a marketable commodity, to be produced on a piece-rate plan, rated, bought and sold by standard units, measured, counted, and reduced to stable equivalence by impersonal, mechanical tests...The work is hereby reduced to a mechanistic, statistical consistency, with numerical standards and units, which conduces to perfunctory and mediocre work throughout, and acts to deter both students and teachers from a free pursuit of knowledge, as contrasted with the pursuit of academic credits.

Examinations and grades are usually rationalized by university professors and administrators as a carrot and stick device to reward achievement in the learning process and to coerce underachievers to do better. Without the stimulus of grades, it is said, students will not learn what the professors in their wisdom think is essential for them to learn. It is sometimes added that in a highly competitive society, the aggressive struggle for grades is a salutary introduction to the real life struggle for money and status "the good old principle of victory in competition with others," as one professor has written.

A study in the early 1960's by a team of sociologists at the University of Kansas suggests that most students take precisely this view of grades, regarding them as a kind of currency that can be converted into good academic records assuring future success in their careers. The most admired type of student at the University of Kansas when this inquiry was made was the man who was efficient and cunning in the pursuit of good grades. Such a person was considered to be mature, in contrast to the immature student who took a serious interest in an academic discipline or read books other than those assigned for courses.

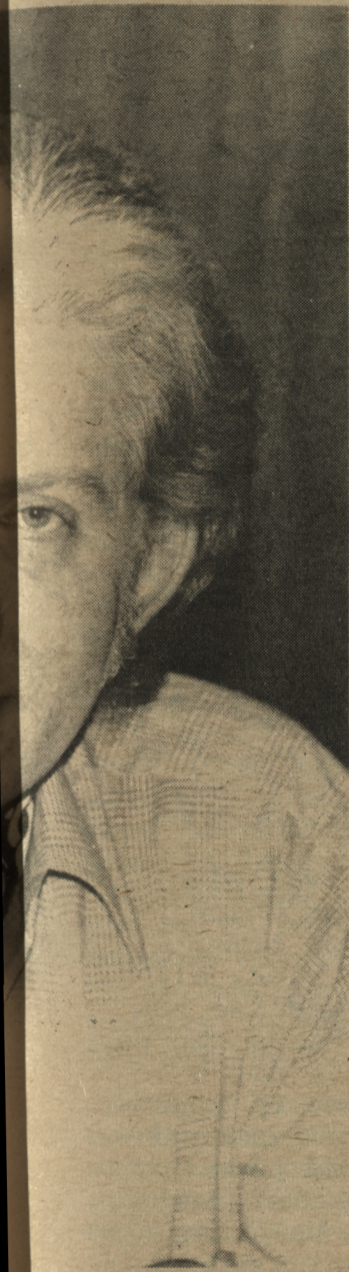
This Kansas study confirms what most of us know from

personal experience, that examinations and grades, which professors misguidedly view as devices to facilitate learning, actually take the place of learning altogether. In fact trying to learn may seriously interfere with the much more serious business of improving grades. A student who becomes absorbed in a particularly fascinating course may fall behind in his four or five other courses, thus weakening his grade average. The overwhelming majority of students observed at the University of Kansas, bright, average, and dull, took a minimal interest in their courses as learning experiences but a great deal of interest in developing personal strategies for achieving good courses grades. The tactics with which we are all embarrassingly familiar--rote memorizing of textbooks and lecture notes, pre-examination cramming, copying and cribbing during exams, plagiarizing term papers, flattering susceptible professors, electing one or two "Mickey Mouse" courses were assiduously planned and perfected.

A Columbia University researcher published a paper in 1964 asserting that at least half the college students in the United States engage in one or more forms of academic dishonesty such as cheating and plagiarizing, little of which would probably happen if grades were abolished. Most students believe cheating is morally wrong, this investigator concluded, but the pressure to obtain acceptable grades is so strong that they feel they have little choice. Many of the student participants in the Kansas study admitted that most of what they had allegedly learned was forgotten within hours of the examination, a finding confirmed by numerous other studies by educational psychologists. As one Kansas student graphically put it,

You put it all down on paper everything you've memorized, and then you forget it. You walk out of class and your mind is purged. Perfectly clean. There's nothing in it. Someone asks you...next week what you learned...and you couldn't tell them anything because you didn't learn anything. There are a lot of guys around here who are very expert at doing that. They take a course and learn what has to be learned and get through the course with an A.

Despite such overwhelming evidence to the contrary most professors continue to put great faith in examinations and grading as important



destroy the morale of the student whose aspirations appear to be higher than his ability.

As the French sociologist Jacques Ellul observes, what is said to be education is really a technique for making men happy in a milieu that normally would make them unhappy, if they had not been worked upon, molded, and processed for just this milieu. "The world is filled with people," writes Professor David Bakan of the University of Chicago Psychology Department, "who carry permanent psychological scars from their youthful experiences with grades and whose effectiveness as adults was made less rather than more.

Some commentators such as the business journalist, Peter Drucker, contend that this "cooling out" process is indispensable in a complex