

Student Involvement: The Why and How

by RALPH KEYES*

Why involve students at all? Ill-informed, excitable, immature, rude — they hardly have the qualities one would want in sober captains of higher education.

The question stands. As administrators still quiver amid real and anticipated Berkeleyite and Columbia wreckage, and the catchphrase “Student Power” arouses enthusiasm in college presidents comparable to that of George Wallace for Stokeley Carmichael, the question of the students’ role in setting policy for American higher education becomes increasingly crucial.

The word has gone forth. Students can increasingly expect to be dubbed “full partners” and eagerly courted for “responsible” participation in decision making. Just what decisions are fair game for these fledglings has yet to be determined. An American Council on Education meeting two years ago unearthed widespread support for student involvement, but had difficulty going beyond campus food services in agreeing where that involvement might take place. Chancellor Samuel Gould of the State University of New York system feels that although students are “in no position to

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make the deciding judgments as to what should be done," they "can participate in the process that brings about such judgments." This can provide them with the opportunity "to be told of proposed changes plus an opportunity to express student opinion of such change," and will allow them to serve as "interpreters to the rest as to why changes are proposed." By doing so "They help to bring the entire campus more quickly and accurately to sympathetic understanding and cooperation."¹

Although it is the trend, many still won't buy even this student-as-pacifier deviation from strict administration-faculty control of our institutions of higher dissemination. They point trembling fingers to the tortured analogy of student partnership in Latin America with its attendant violence and educational inertia. "It's taken professors years to get what influence they have," explains one History professor, "and they're not about to give any of that up easily to students."

A generally accepted case for student involvement has yet to be made. A subsequent definition of their legitimate role is even more elusive.

The Case for Student Involvement

The case for involving students is generally based on moral-democratic grounds. This has a certain legitimacy. All those constituting a community should be consulted or at least have recourse to appeal decisions affecting them. Still, moral manifestos alone can't make a case. In addition, if we are interested in imaginative, daring forms of education, serious questions can be raised about the innovative potential of academic democracy. The lethargy of faculty-dominated institutions makes one doubt that the simple extension of suffrage to their younger versions will in itself improve American higher education.

A better case can be made for involvement of students in academic planning for its purely practical value to the institution as a whole. The best implementation occurs when spokesmen of all those being planned for can be heard before the fact, from the very outset. Since students are generally the largest constituency being served by academic decision-makers, a healthy dose of their opinions from the initial stages can only help insure that institutional development will be ultimately acceptable to those whom it is supposed to benefit.

A second practical asset to be gained by involving students is simply the creative ideas they can come up with. Good writing occurs where you find it, say the English professors, whether it's on the back of a Wheaties package, or in a Dostoyevsky novel. In the same sense, good ideas occur where you find them, and can emanate as well from an obnoxious freshman as a tenured professor — perhaps better. If students are often ill-informed on weighty academic matters, and generally lacking in context, it may be just this distorted perspective that frees them to have the liveliness and imagination which produces breakthroughs. "Roads traveled over and over again have an obvious facility for turning into ruts," said Webster College President Jacqueline Grennan recently to a group of students. "This is why we are so dependent on the corrective and often disruptive power of your own inexperience which will propose to us the alternative behavior which our very experience blocks us from seeing."²

I can't name the number of times I have seen pesky underclassmen at Antioch College audaciously blurt out simplistic, even embarrassing questions and proposals that more "sensible" faculty members and even older students completely overlooked in all their responsibility. Antioch's radical First Year Program itself grew out of a student's proposal. (An example many faculty would not find supportive of an argument for increased student involvement.) Dr. Sam Baskin of Antioch estimates that the amount of time devoted by students to planning the First Year Program was the equivalent of \$20,000 or so of professional effort. Perhaps student involvement has market value to boot.

A final argument for putting students in policy-making roles is that it is quite stylish and can even be a source of some prestige. One of the major items of interest in the new experimental college being planned in the State University of New York at Old Westbury system has been their employment of students as full-time consultants. Press coverage invariably focuses this step as a major innovation.

What Role for Students?

Unfortunately, even where student involvement is accepted in principle, ingrained biases can keep it from being implemented to anyone's satisfaction. A tyranny of "expertise" too often forces students into token, advisory or *ex-officio* roles and excludes them entirely from some areas of decision-making. The Muscatine Report, issued in response to Berkeley's riots, made it clear that many committees were reserved for senior faculty due to their experience and were closed not only to students, but to junior faculty as well. Since the case for student participation can't be based on their expertness, institutions like Berkeley obviously are not yet ready to benefit from this innovation.

Even where the fear of students' lack of expertise is not stated explicitly, it crops up in more subtle ways. Few institutions, for example, will let a student even see a budget, let alone help plan one. At SUNY's projected Old Westbury campus, students are consulted widely on a great range of issues, but when it is time for hard decisions to be made on curricular, budgetary, or staff matters, a small coterie of the senior staff caucuses privately. I don't think this constitutes a deliberate exclusion of the "junior consultants," but is simply an instinctive reliance on "the experts" when the chips are down. It does accentuate the clearly non-essential nature of the "junior planners."

Another perceived difficulty in having students sit down with their elders to reason together is the lack of "social grace" with which they often confront the situation. Such niceties as shoes or combed hair, far from suits and ties, don't always seem relevant to the topic at hand for student participants.

On the other side of the rudeness coin, one should not overlook the salutary effect student participants can have on faculty manners. At Antioch no less than most other institutions, closed faculty meetings frequently run red with bloody combat and the high drama of petty oratory. On Administrative Council, however, and its numerous subcommittees, in the public glare of student coparticipants, the same professors are noticeably more restrained, polite to each other, concise in their comments and perti-

nent in argument. The threat of being revealed to students in all one's rude pettiness can work wonders for faculty etiquette.

Glancing nervously at "Student Power" and "Student Syndicalist" manifestos, many faculty worry that students will vote in a block, and be a purely disruptive influence. There is nothing more effective for de-fanging would-be syndicalists than putting them in a position to help make real decisions on real issues.

My impression is that the major, but least-articulated difficulty inherent in involving students in decision-making is their transient role in the institution. There at most for only four or five years, and effectively operative for only a couple of these, students just can't share the tranquility of the years-long or even lifetime investment of older members. Faculty and administrators, with their longer-range perspective, naturally resent the notion that those only passing through should have a significant say in the long-range planning of an institution. Students, on the other hand, often find their older cohorts insufferably turtle-like on crucial issues. Five years is not a long time for an entrenched faculty planner; it represents more than a lifetime to an upperclassman hopeful of seeing some fruits of his labor before graduating.

This legitimate, and in many ways unresolvable disparity of perspective, is perhaps the major barrier to meaningful student-faculty-administration partnership. It can take extraordinary patience for permanent staff members to deal graciously with an endless stream of changing faces and views, each one as certain as the last of the timeless validity of his criticisms and proposals. Yet the constant turnover can in itself be a virtue. It forces entrenched decision-makers to be constantly on their toes, constantly having to re-justify their stands, restimulated by ongoing fresh blood, and in general touch with changing trends in student culture. Students, for their part, can and generally do quickly learn that a little patience is always in order, and that the value of their input will not always be realized in immediate tangible results. And in the end, would it necessarily hurt our colleges and universities if they became just *ad hoc* enough that thoughtful student involvement would have avenues for keeping some aspects of the institution constantly changing and in flux?

Principles for Student Involvement

Having accepted the legitimacy of student involvement at all levels of decision-making in higher education, and recognizing the inherent difficulties involved, what guidelines can be determined for ensuring a real, constructive role for students to play in institutional decision-making?

First of all, it is basic that students be given a *real* vote, on *real* issues. It doesn't take long to sniff out a fishy sort of "now you see it, now you don't" consultative process. Many institutions feel that one or two spots on a few harmless committees, or student advisory groups, or "junior consultant" status or *ex-officio* membership will meet the need.

The point is that TRUST is inherent to any meaningful partnership. Until students are trusted to participate constructively in decision-making in *any* area, subject to their choice and not an administrator's whim, the whole nature of their involvement will remain artificial and farcical. A co-opted student given limited access to

carefully selected policy matters has just cause to feel used and consequently more rebellious. It is only when the burden of responsibility is shifted to him, when all avenues are open and he is trusted to choose where to exert his influence, that a healthier relationship between students and non-students can begin to emerge.

This is not to say that students should have total or even majority votes on general academic policy. The arguments about students' lack of experience and transience are strong enough to mitigate against that. But what they should have is enough power to play a swing role, to be able to cast deciding votes in concert with non-student allies should the occasion arise. It is only then that their arguments can carry the weight of potential (if seldom exercised) power. It is only with this type of influence and recourse that the motivation for meaningful immersion in academic issues can be created in a student body.

A real say by law, however, is meaningless if the issues being dealt with are mundane. A sense of second-class citizenship, that one is suited to be consulted on some questions but not others, can only poison the decision-making atmosphere and ultimately lead to suspicion, misunderstanding and lack of trust. Though mistrust of students' propriety and discretion keeps them out of most touchy areas, there is no evidence that students are any less discreet than faculty when given confidence, and their qualifications for dealing with these areas are certainly no less than those of many faculty. Is an English Professor more qualified to pass on a budget than an Accounting senior? Who is a shrewder judge of a prospective faculty member's teaching ability than those who might have to study with him? Where better to look for imaginative curriculum departures than among audacious students? Once students are given a real voice on real — all issues, the effect on a campus' educational atmosphere could be electric.

A second guideline is that on areas largely of student concern, they should have ultimate control, although the faculty and administration should be given a say. In such areas as Rules, Food Service, and campus publications, the weight of expertise rests with the students. They live with Rules, eat the food every day, read the newspapers and magazines and are, therefore, best qualified to carry the weight of decision-making in such fields.

A third guideline is that student-faculty-administration partnership can't just be decreed, but must be worked at, looked at, defined and re-defined constantly to stay in shape. It is asking too much to expect staid professors to sit down with bumptious students and automatically develop an egalitarian attitude and real appreciation of the younger members' potential contribution. Conversely, students have to work equally hard to alleviate their authority figure and over-30 hang-ups, as they learn to treat grown-ups as one-time youths. They have to look at each other, talk with each other about each other, and slowly develop a style of working together for real, not just show.

Again, if a student participant's role is not defined clearly, it is only natural that the older academicians already holding power will revert to an instinctive skepticism about youth's ability to contribute. An amorphous "we'll consult with some students"

attitude almost inevitably has this result. If students are considered legitimate decision-makers, a clearly defined (though changeable) role and means of influence is his best protection against intended or unwitting condescension.

The fourth and final guideline, which will naturally evolve if the first three are adhered to, is simply that an atmosphere should be created in which it becomes almost reflexive to consult spokesmen of all parties on all issues affecting the direction of the institution.

When this becomes a habit, the problems of intolerable student-faculty friction on major issues will inevitably diminish. The ultimate goal, of course, is for representatives of all parties to be able to sit down together, not as spokesmen for power blocks and inevitable disputants, but simply as a diverse group of *people*, there to work on a problem and reach a solution acceptable to the greatest number. Only then can we begin to reduce our petty hostilities and get on with major educational questions.

REFERENCES

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