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This is the the text of the keynote address which he delivered at our 1984 conference.

## **COLLEGE LEARNING CENTERS AND EXCELLENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

**Dr. William Collins**

This Sixth National Conference on College Learning Centers is a significant event because we find ourselves in the midst of an exciting time in higher education. It is a time of enormous challenge and opportunity as students seek access to higher education and institutions seek enrollment stability. Different perspectives are clearly evident, but I believe that College Learning Centers have an important role to play as higher education confronts the crises that are already upon it. Yet, these crises pose significant risks both to students and to institutions.

One viewpoint, expressed by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, maintains that our very nation is at risk due to a "rising tide of mediocrity in the educational foundations of society."

The Report Notes that:

1. Some 23 million American adults are illiterate
2. That 13% of all 17 year olds in the United States can be considered functionally illiterate, and that illiteracy among minority youth can run as high as 40%;
3. Average achievement of high school students on standardized tests is lower now than 25 years ago when Sputnik launched a scientific rivalry between the US and Russia;
4. CEEB SAT scores have steadily declined over the last twenty years and on average are about 50 points lower on both the verbal and math sections;
5. The number and proportion of students demonstrating superior achievement on SAT (that is, students with scores of about 650) has declined;
6. A steady decline in science achievement scores by 17 year olds was also noted as was a decline in tested achievement of graduated college students. In addition, the number of remedial math courses at the college level has increased by 72% between 1975 and 1980.

The Report goes on to call for more rigorous standards and higher expectations by colleges and universities; including raising admissions standards.

Yet, the Report has generated some concern that its findings will be used in an exclusionary way to emphasize excellence at the expense of the common good. How can this be so?

Consider another important factor influencing higher education: the stark reality of demographic

change. I am sure you are all aware of the projected decline in the college age cohort. The lowest point is expected to occur in about 1992 when the number of 17 - 24 year olds will be 25 percent lower than in 1980.

In fact, according to Harold Hodgkinson, senior fellow at the Institute for Educational Leadership:

Higher education can look forward to a general decrease in the size of high school graduating classes for 16 years, followed by increased numbers of high school graduates beginning in 1998.

Therefore, higher education in general can look forward to over a decade of competition and new recruitment strategies designed to attract students and to keep them. A key factor in the changing demographic scenario is that the minority population is becoming a larger proportion of our society as the non-minority birth rate declines. In fact, the inescapable conclusion is that American public schools are now very heavily enrolled with minority students, large numbers of whom will be college eligible. Yet, historical inequalities will follow them to college, and sincere efforts will be needed to retain them and to keep institutions solvent. As Hodgkinson so keenly observes:

Thus, out of sheer self-interest, it behooves the higher education community to do everything to make sure that the largest possible number of minority students do well in public school and thus become college eligible. If this is not done, and significant numbers of minority students leave the public schools

before graduation or graduate without the aspiration for college, the potential decline in the college cohort would not be 24 percent for the nation by 1990, but could be twice that.

In addition to the declining college-age cohort, there is the question of location or population dispersal and its impact on higher education. It is apparent that in the 1980's the Sun Belt (i.e., the Southeast, Southwest, and far Western states) will be a hotbed of activity. Favorable energy costs have spurred economic development in the Sun Belt. Corporate headquarters are relocating from the Industrial Northeast and its high energy costs, to the Sun Belt. Job opportunities are attracting people to where the action is, in the South. By implication, as masses head to the Sun Belt, the Northeast will decline in population. Moreover, those who move will be the most mobile: the young, the educated, the skilled. But they will be moving to areas with very heavy minority concentrations. Those who remain in the Northeast will be the less mobile, and likewise will be heavily minority. What this means for higher education is that the availability of special services for large numbers of students will be all the more important. It does not mean that there will not be students in college in the future; it does mean that the kinds of students in college will be even more different from the traditional college-going student than in the present. Higher education can expect the typical student body in the future to include more adult learners, more returning veterans, more women, and many more minorities.

We should expect the higher education community to

take some risks as these changes materialize, and the college learning center will be in a unique position to serve the needs of both the students and the institution. There is a dual role for learning centers to play in both the cognitive and the affective domains. In the cognitive domain the important role is to help students develop academic skills and insights so that they can compete successfully within the institution. This may include tutorials, supplemental instruction, reading, writing, or study skills development, and pre-fresh summer programs. Such activities are the nuts-and-bolts of the learning center's efforts and serve to help the student establish a solid foundation on which to launch the college career. It is an effort to bridge knowledge gaps that have developed in the student's education.

But in providing such services, Learning Skills Center staff will be among the first to see frustration, ambivalence, even despair among students who are not achieving at the level that they had expected. For this reason the Learning Center must be concerned with the student's affective adjustment as well:

- How does the student feel about his work?
- How do students' aspirations change as they confront the reality of college-level work and competition?
- How do students feel about themselves and their sense of belonging as a legitimate part of the higher education community?

Faculty members are likely to be among the last to learn of such affectively-based concerns. Students do not want to expose their misgivings to someone who evaluates their progress.

On the other hand, learning center staff are frequently concerned with any aspect of the student's life that might have an adverse impact upon performance. Students recognize this and as a result gravitate towards learning center staff for much more than just cognitive-based support.

And so we see learning center staff as being a crucial crossroad between teaching and student services work; the learning center can and should be the campus core for understanding and articulating students' academic and personal needs, while also emphasizing the commitment to learning, to knowledge, and to the fundamental principles of academe.

The experiences at my institution, Cornell University, may serve as an illustrative microcosm of what has happened in higher education over the last twenty years and what will happen over the next 16 years.

Twenty years ago, 1964, was another exciting period for our society, including higher education. The landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act symbolized rising expectations, dreams of a truly integrated society, and hopes for continued prosperity for all on an equal footing.

Higher education responded to this era by starting special programs for disadvantaged students; such programs consisted mainly of admissions and financial aid considerations, mostly for Blacks. But few campuses did anything at all initially to provide supportive services or to aid in social adjustment of the differently prepared students who were being admitted. By 1969 pressures that had built over a four-or-five year period erupted around the country in the form of student protest against an unpopular war and against institutional racism. At Cornell, Black students had guns as they pro-

tested and it made the cover of Newsweek. The image of higher education changed from that of a genteel and intellectual society to that of a volatile intellectual maelstrom. This was no insignificant event and, in fact, just recently Newsweek did a 15-year follow-up of the Black students involved in Cornell's 1969 protests and found many of them reaping the benefits of their Ivy League education, while ever mindful of their struggle to attain it.

Although learning centers had been around prior to such protests, they experienced phenomenal growth since 1970; over 1400 centers such as the Long Island University Learning Skills Center now exist in this country alone.

At Cornell University the Learning Skills Center is a part of a broad program of assistance offered both to non-traditional students and to any other student who wants to improve learning skills.

But it is with the non-traditional students that success is measured.

- Participation in our supplemental instruction program has been shown to improve course performance for such students by a full letter grade.
- The graduation rate for minority students at Cornell is better than the national average, although still lower than the institutional average.
- Over the last seven years, over 1,000 non-traditional students have graduated from Cornell.
- Another 150 minority students graduated in the class of 1984.

Such numbers may seem insignificant in comparison to a college with a much larger minority enrollment, but remember that 20 years ago only about a dozen American blacks were enrolled at Cornell and large numbers of such students (i.e., c. 100 entrants) didn't occur until after 1970.

The Learning Skills Center at Cornell University has been an important link in this success. Its programs include a full complement of academic supportive services that ease the transition from high school and help to build a solid foundation in the freshman year; it is an effective means of reducing the risk of academic failure by non-traditional students. A pre-freshman summer program that allows students to develop basic skills while also getting acquainted with the institution is another effective component. Summer Program participants are involved in a six-week program of academic skill-building during the Summer prior to their freshman year. Although some Summer Program students have composite SAT scores that are over 100 points lower than other students, their first year's academic performance is not appreciably different from non-traditional students with high test scores. Such students were selected for the summer experience because of weaknesses in their academic backgrounds; the summer experience serves to strengthen their skills and make such students better prepared for the fall term.

Further academic support can be provided during the academic year such as tutoring or supplemental instruction programs. At Cornell, a supplemental instruction program involves about one-half of the eligible non-traditional students. Their performance in courses having a supplemental instruction program is



evidenced to improve markedly. Student development programs focusing on such matters as leadership or role-modeling, along with effective counseling and advising programs, also serve to assist the student in personal adjustment and in meeting the academic challenge.

The goal of risk-taking with non-traditional students is to win, that is to observe such students progress to graduation from the institution. And when over 1,000 such students graduate from a school like Cornell University, something right is happening. Given the risks of the future in higher education, we must consider where in the academy are the resources to meet the challenge. I believe it is the learning center staff that is uniquely prepared to assist students to develop their thinking skills; it is also the Learning Skills Center staff who are so uniquely aware of the personal adjustment students go through in college and who therefore are uniquely poised to affect the students' self-esteem and perception of belonging as a significant part of the college community. With knowledge, skill, and experience in both the cognitive and affective domains of student life, the Learning Skills Center rightly belongs as a cornerstone in higher education's effort to meet the challenges of the future. And so the college learning center is uniquely qualified as a hedge against the risks inherent in the future towards which we are all surely headed; in fact the future may already be upon us.

And it is gatherings such as this one that can help learning centers share their experiences as a legitimate part of that future in higher education, as we learn from each other and take back to our individual campuses ideas for helping non-traditional and

other students to achieve the excellence in education that they are so eager to demonstrate. I hope you will use this conference towards that end.

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