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A noted humanist at Kansas State University sees a challenge for higher education in service to the elderly and Indians on reservations. He suggests challenging the innate creativity of these people who have, for one reason or another, been cut off from the fabric of society.

the community college: elderly, indians, and education

Joel Climenhaga



A writer of poetry, drama, fiction, prose as well as an actor and director, Joel Climenhaga has an unusual viewpoint for an educator. Currently an associate professor of speech at Kansas State University, Climenhaga has taught writing and drama in high schools and colleges in Pennsylvania, Ohio, North Carolina, Georgia, and Missouri. He serves as adviser to secondary education majors in theatre and speech.

I

Traditionally, community colleges have followed an "open door" policy in admissions. Although this has caused some criticism in certain academic circles, the advantages of such policy to the community-at-large have far outweighed any negative attributes. An untold number of people who never would have achieved educational fulfillment otherwise have been able to do so because of the long-standing tradition followed by community colleges of granting entrance to any graduate of any high school. In other instances, people who have not graduated from high school have been able to pursue an education at a community college because of the fact that they were more than eighteen years of age.

In the opinion of this writer, this is an excellent practice. Education should not be limited in a democratic society. Every man should be allowed to work toward as high an intellectual level of achievement and understanding as possible without regard to past failure or lack of education. The "open door" policy gives opportunity for such to occur.

Nevertheless, there are segments of society which cannot now look forward to much else than intellectual stagnation and subsequent emotional frustration and paralysis. Two such segments are the elderly and the Indians living on reservations. It is true that these two groups are considered by many people, with various programs being devised to meet their needs. Most often, however, the consideration given to old people and Indians on reservations is on much too superficial a level. We devise hobbies and games for them or make it possible to practice crafts, but we do not give serious consideration to the furthering of their education. (This may be caused by the fact that most people somehow envision education as something which is terminal in nature, rather than a continuing process.) What is proposed here is that truly serious consideration be given to the furthering of education for the elderly and Indians on reservations. The comments in this essay are only germinal in nature. Hopefully, someone else will take what is written here in the abstract and apply the concepts in strictly concrete terms. Considering all the problems of financing education, the best place for such a concrete application to occur is within the community college system.

II

My grandfather was born in 1850, dying at the age of ninety-one. He lived his entire life out on the farm where he was born, in Stevensville, Ontario, Canada, a little village twelve miles from Niagara Falls. During the last ten years of his life he was completely blind. All of his life he had worked

hard on his farm. Additionally, he had been exceptionally active mentally. As well as helping initiate the foreign-mission work of his denomination, he had been its treasurer in Canada. After becoming blind there was nothing he could do. Although it was a slow process, saddening to behold, his brain eventually failed him from simple lack of use. When he died at the age of ninety-one he was not even conscious of the fact that he had ever been alive.

On the other hand, my father was blind also during the last eight years of his life. But my father remained alert and completely perceptive intellectually until the very moment he died. The week before he died he attended the second marriage of his eldest son. The morning of the day he died he had written a letter to one of his daughters. What had helped keep my father intellectually alert was the fact that he had learned to touch-type *after he had become blind*. During his last years he wrote many letters to many people. Also, my father had access to books read on phonograph records. He said he believed he had read more books by listening to them after he had become blind than he had actually read during the fifty years before. My father died at the age of eighty-six.

I've often wondered what would have happened if my grandfather had had something he could have done which would have kept him intellectually active during the final ten years of his life? I doubt that he would have gotten into such a state that he would not have been even conscious of the fact that he had ever been alive!

How many other old people are there who are not being challenged intellectually? Perhaps even more important to society, how much "brain power" for mankind in general is being lost because old people are not being challenged enough, are not being given opportunity enough to continue the learning process? There is, after all, a tremendous amount of wisdom on deposit in the minds of old people, from which not even the interest is being drawn by society now. There would be enormous benefit to society itself were there some program initiated which would give old people a continuing goal toward which to work. Think for a moment of the benefit which came to society because of the activity of such men as George Bernard Shaw, Bertrand Russell, and Albert Einstein; more importantly, think of how much each of these men did *after the age of seventy!* I cannot believe any of these men were innately any more intelligent than my grandfather. My grandfather was a very shrewd and inventive man—and there was a lot of brain power went to waste because there was nothing to challenge him during the final ten years of his life.

There have been some motions in the direction of what is being considered here. Certain private universities and at least one state university have instituted programs of study intended specifically for old people. No degrees are involved, which is a lack in the programs. Regardless of the contrary opinion held by many young people today, a degree still remains the prime symbol of education (or, to put it another way, the prime symbol of something completed, a goal achieved) as far as the public is concerned. Also, these programs remain quite limited in the number of people they can reach because of the expense involved. Normal tuition prevails, making such programs too often beyond the financial reach of anyone other than the retired rich. Certain

community centers throughout the country have instituted activity programs for senior citizens. Unfortunately, most often these programs are on the level of the pursuit of some hobby, similar in nature to the shuffleboard contests sponsored by condominiums for the aged, not working toward some specific meaningful goal. Many churches, particularly in the cities, from time to time will have programs for their older members. But these also tend to suffer from the same lack of motivational factor.

It might seem that colleges and universities would be a logical place for some sort of educational program designed specifically for old people to be implemented. However, as has been pointed out, the tuition cost of the average college or university is too much for most older people to pay. It needs to be remembered that most people past the age of sixty-five live on pensions or Social Security payments. What they get is as a matter of statistical fact barely enough to keep meeting the ordinary costs of living. Moreover, many people past the age of sixty-five do not have a high-school education (or, if they do have that much, they do not feel themselves intellectually equipped to meet the "demands" of a college or university program). Community colleges, on the other hand, because of their "open door" policy of admission, do not evoke the "fear" in the minds of entrants that colleges and universities do. Also, community colleges do not have the heavier tuition costs of the four-year and graduate schools. Therefore, what better place is there for the initiation of a goal program for the elderly than the community college? The community colleges now have the distinction of being the most democratically-oriented institutions of higher learning in this country, and are the best equipped to serve the needs of this segment of society.

My proposal, then, is for the community college system to initiate a program for which the only admission requirement is that *the student be sixty years of age or more!* Have within the program courses of study in all the disciplines, but with the greatest emphasis on the humanities and fine arts. Make the total program of a reasonable length, taking into consideration the age of the student—say, two years at a minimum (to follow the current chronological concept of the community college), then progressing to three and four years. Offer degrees upon completion of the programs—a degree the chief distinction of which would be that *only an elderly person can earn it*. Call these degrees what you will. BAW (Bachelor of Age and Wisdom); MAW (Master of Age and Wisdom); DAW (Doctor of Age and Wisdom). If the academicians in the so-called "institutions of higher learning" protest too loudly the conferring of a "Bachelor" or "Master" or "Doctor" degree by a community college, change the name of the degree to something else. In any event, though, *highly publicize the fact the program is for old people only!* As to grades in such a program, such pressure ought to be totally removed. The only requirement in the program—at least, for the conferral of a degree—should be its completion. Perhaps the most important thing in such a program ought to be that its administrators should never be afraid to include among its teachers people over the age of sixty-five!

As Lord Buckley said about Jesus Christ, "You lay it down, Nazz, we'll pick it up!" I've laid it down; it's my hope that

some far-sighted community college administration and faculty will pick it up. I am confident this idea will work. If it were to do nothing else, were such a program as this ever brought into being it would create tremendous excitement.

III

Twenty-five years ago I attended a community college in California. Even before that, in 1939 and 1940, I had gone to a private denominational school which was at that time a combination of an academy and two-year college. I had been only an average high school student. When the time came to go to college, I did not have much interest in it. I soon dropped out, not going back for more than seven years. In the interval, I had worked in a variety of jobs and had been in the Army. When I once again had the interest in going to college, I neither had the money nor the academic record for admission to the state university. But the community college accepted me. From that time on, my educational career properly prospered. In various achievement and aptitude tests I always had received high scores; I had the necessary so-called intellectual equipment to be a student of university caliber, as my subsequent record has indicated. At the beginning, however, and at certain crossroads in my life, I did not have the correct psychological maturity and motivation to pursue successfully the requirements of a college education. When the time came that I did have the proper motivation, it was only a community college which would admit me. I doubt that I would have ever become a university professor if a community college had not given me a chance.

Thinking in parallel terms, how much deeper is an ethnic lack of psychological motivation than that which is sometimes found in an individual? Consider the Indians on reservations. These people have for generations been kept "retarded"—not allowed to be either their cultural selves or to be part of the larger society. Relegated to the role of "tourist attractions," they have not been able to follow even the faintest of glimmerings toward intellectual fulfillment. Now, an entire culture cannot be cut off from the rest of the fabric of society without society itself suffering, too. Today, finally, some opportunities are being presented to Indians on reservations, particularly on the level of advancement of vocational skills. Nevertheless, options for the average Indian on a reservation remain tragically few.

To know how to deal properly with the situation of the Indian on the reservation it must be understood that the Indian's "backwardness" is more than just a simple lack of "book-learning." More importantly, it is a denial of the creative surge in the heart of the Indian. The innate creativity which is in all humans is not allowed to come forth in them, caught as they are within the restrictive influences and controls of their environment. What would happen if someone were truly to encourage them in the belief that they are as "good" and "bright" as everyone else? Suppose, for a moment, that there were in existence a program which went *directly to the Indians on reservations* and taught them to write, to speak. I don't mean by this to teach them grammar and syntax and spelling and platform manner. All that is *form*; all that is a matter of "book-learning." What I am suggesting is a program which teaches them to *write*, to *speak*, a program which teaches them that what they write

and say is artistically and humanistically and sociologically significant, regardless of the grammar, the syntax, the spelling, the phrasing, the stuttering, the manner. (Let's accept the concepts of Noam Chomsky concerning innate linguistic capability as valid.) Were such a program to exist, society would see a flowering of the Indian consciousness far greater than has yet been dreamed by even the Indians themselves. It is not enough to tell the Indian to come in off his reservation and go to school. That has been done by some. Education should go to the reservation and *there* set about the task.

Again, because of admission policies and attitudes concerning academic purpose, community colleges are the most completely equipped to do this sort of thing. It is interesting to note the number of community colleges—particularly in the Western states—which are in quite close proximity to Indian reservations. Also, an unusually large number of community colleges now have widespread "extension center" programs as part of their regular curricular offerings. Although extension centers are largely focused on vocational instruction, there would be little, if any, problem in expanding such extension programs to include going to the reservations. Here again, administrators of such a program, as well as faculty members involved, should never be afraid to include on the staff Indians themselves! Also, it should not be grades as such, which would be important in such a program; instead, it should be the lighting of the creative spark.

IV

There are my two brief proposals. Undoubtedly, there are many other proposals of similar nature for other segments of society which can be visualized. Education in a democratic society should be for *all* the people — old and young, skilled or not, regardless of race, color, or creed.

If we think along these lines, as educators, we will be immensely helping society. Our founding fathers thought in terms of the inalienable right of every citizen to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." That concept can be paraphrased to secure the right of every citizen to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of intellectual and creative fulfillment." Community colleges can and should be in the vanguard of the development of such programs.

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