

Experimentation, it is true, is as much a part of the American tradition as universal education itself. It is true, also, that a series of experimental colleges have been based on the principles that are central to the proposed College of Community Service—individualized programs, respect for work experience, the importance of learning directly from contemporary social situations. Not one of the existing experimental colleges, however—not Antioch, Bennington, or even Black Mountain and Goddard—addresses the problem of providing higher education for the mature working people of our cities. These are colleges for upper middle class liberals and the few representatives of poor, minority-group young people who can be helped to qualify for admission. As the education historian, Frederick Rudolph, bluntly states, they are “not really peoples’ colleges; . . . simply variations on the old elite institutions now operating according to new principles.” (1)

In the cities, where the people are, higher educational institutions make little or no attempt to function as “peoples’ colleges.” In general they deliver a prefabricated college education, impartially to all comers, boxed as English—A. Introduction to Sociology, six credits of laboratory science. If a mature woman overcomes the hurdles of the admissions office and can schedule her life to include college attendance, she confronts the same, set, departmentalized courses and the routine requirements, designed for middleclass young people and for the most part unchanged for a generation or more. How useful is that brand of education to those in a ghetto? What relevance does the prescribed college curriculum have for the low-income Negro with a superior mind and uneven preparation, who is determined to help improve the Harlem schools?

Negro colleges hold out no solution to the problem, even in the few southern cities where excellent Negro universities exist. In the first place, as Kenneth Clark points out, “Negroes are ambivalent about Negro colleges; even at best, they are ashamed of them, for such colleges are an anachronism.” (2) But in any case Negro colleges have been no more sensitive than the institutions they emulate toward the emerging needs of their communities and constituencies.

The bold and basic changes, necessary to accommodate rising demands for higher education of the deprived, are not likely to occur in long-established colleges, Negro or not. “Resistance to fundamental reform,” as Rudolph has said, is “ingrained in the American collegiate and university tradition.” For more than 300 years, he observes, “except on rare occasions, the historic policy of the American college and university (has been) drift, reluctant accommodation, belated recognition that while no one was looking, change had in fact taken place.” (3)

Women of the inner city have every American citizen’s right to equal opportunity for higher education. They have been deprived of sufficient preparatory education by a complex of circumstances deriving from poverty and segregation. Now, as a by-product of the social revolution taking place among urban minorities, they are awakened to the potential of education, and many are clamoring for it.

The colleges of the establishment are not geared to respond to this rising group, and in fact do not seem to be aware of its existence. In the educational vacuum the Women’s Talent Corps proposes to introduce a precedent-ignoring, innovating, peoples’ college—The College of Community Service.

In September 1966 a radio station carried an announcement of the Women’s Talent Corps, a new program of training for jobs in the schools and social agencies of New York City’s blighted neighborhoods. Within three days the Corps had received hundreds of inquiries from women eager to fill the openings.

A large proportion of applicants for the Corps were Puerto Rican or Negro. The majority were women in their thirties or late twenties, with two or more children. Typically, they were high school dropouts, but many had not attended school beyond the seventh or eighth grade. A number had once hoped to go to college but had been “counselled” into commercial or home economics courses by the school guidance officer.

Staff members of the Women’s Talent Corps saw, in the rush of applicants, an overwhelming willingness among women living in slum conditions to work for community betterment, and an outcry for more education. The result was a design for an institution of higher education that breaks the mold of the traditional college:

1. It meets the women where they are educationally, and helps them prepare for equivalency examinations at the secondary level as they begin college work.