We Get The Teachers We Deserve

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What New York State Has Up Its Sleeve and What It Could Mean To The University and the Larger Community

In April 1977, a Task Force on Teacher Education and Certification appointed by Commissioner Gordon Ambach of the State Education Department recommended the establishment of a Professional Practices Board which would oversee the development of a licensure system to replace the present certification system for teachers and certain other professions connected with the public schools. Embedded in the seven recommendations of the task force were the perceived needs to define teaching legally as a profession and to improve methods for examining candidates for teaching and related professional activities. On the basis of the work of that task force as well as other such efforts since the 1950’s, the Legislature and Governor Carey authorized the State Education Department to prepare and solicit public reaction to a Report on Teaching as a Profession (1979). In this paper, I will not deal with the various alternatives presented but, rather, will examine the very idea of licensure and its implications for society.

If teaching needs to be designated as a profession in order for it to be a profession, then there must surely be doubt that it is a profession. If teachers need to be licensed in order to be known as professionals, then there is question whether they are professionals. Ministers are neither designated nor licensed professionals, but the clergy is possibly the second oldest profession. Doctors are licensed, to be sure, but less it seems to recognize their professionalism than to keep undesirables from committing unchecked mischief. Indeed, if recognizing the professional status of teachers is necessary for increasing their “professional spirit” as the State claims, then there seems to be neither very much professional status nor spirit to work with. Those who need such recognition need a good deal more than recognition; and besides, professional groups as well as individuals might better humbly receive recognition than deliberately seek it as their due.

It is curious that the recommendations of the Commissioner’s Task Force and, now, his Preliminary Report exclude the private sector from compliance, in the same fashion that private school teachers currently are exempt from meeting certification requirements. If anything, the State should be regulating those schools and programs which are not under the aegis and supervision of public boards. Isn’t it reasonable for the State to place greater faith in its public boards to oversee their schools and teachers than the private groups with their diverse student and teacher bodies and vested interests? It would seem that if the State were needed anywhere to keep track of certain schools and the qualifications of their teachers, it should be the private schools, not the public schools.

It also appears opportunistic that, currently, when there are more teachers around than jobs available, an effort is finally being made to develop greater specificity concerning not only what a teacher should know but exactly what and whom he or she could teach. Unfortunately, we don’t have any better idea today whether such specificity enhances training than we had when there was a teacher shortage, and when no such effort was made or, for that matter, held desirable.

It is my purpose here to lay out the proposition that those who rule teachers in some measure rule the community. For that reason, the State should not license them and, for that matter, doesn’t license ministers or journalists, because they too have something to do with the character of a community. Of course, the State must take cognizance of its teachers, ministers, journalists, and others who mold opinion and influence behavior, but while the State must watch, the local community must hold ultimate responsibility. While the State observes (just as the extended family) the local communi-

1By long standing tradition, professors are free to speak unburdened by institutional censorship. Of course, we are judged by the wisdom and accuracy of our utterances. In this paper, I speak for myself, as a professor, neither representing the School I proudly serve as dean, nor any other individuals but those who find this argument agreeable.
ty must assume responsibility (as does the immediate family).

And what about the university? Where does the university fit into this scheme to license teachers? Long before there was a State Department of Education there was general agreement that the work of the university is: To stimulate inquiry and, thus, advance knowledge; to instruct those who seek to learn; and to provide formal education for those who would be public servants, be they doctors, ministers, teachers, or engineers. The university is charged by society to commit itself fully to all three of these purposes. But while some of its graduates need to be licensed—possibly doctors fit in this category—others need not be, should not be. While the university prepares podiatrists, lawyers, and bankers, as well as teachers, teaching is not like podiatry, law, or banking. Of course, teaching is like other professions in some respects, but there are important differences between the teacher and the doctor, differences which are fundamentally more serious than their discrepant bank accounts. Consider someone who is an expert in geography or medicine, but cannot teach it. Is it primarily "professional skills" that are lacking? Of course not. Consequently, what does it mean to say that teaching is like podiatry, or law, or banking? If teaching is so specialized and abstruse as it is made out to be in the Commissioner’s Preliminary Report, can the community have any role in the education of its children? For example, can it intelligently vote on school budgets?

It is clear to me that there is a great deal of difference between the teacher and the podiatrist, and least of all is the fact that they deal primarily with opposite ends of the anatomy. Everybody goes to school at one time or another in his or her life, while only a few of us go to podiatrists. Everybody has to go to school, and nobody has to go to a podiatrist. Everybody contributes (or should) to the welfare of the schools, while only those who must give something to their local podiatrists. Who cares about demystifying podiatry? But everyone should care about demystifying education. "How do we raise our young?" is a question that not only every parent should ask of himself, but everybody should ask of society. Of course, even in Education we turn to experts for guidance, but such recourse does not absolve any one of us from full responsibility for our children and some responsibility for all children.

To my way of thinking, an extreme position of the State would not be to deregulate teacher requirements but to create a professional board essentially unconnected from genuine representation by either the people or the scholarly community. What the State Education Department proposes is truly radical and, more importantly, truly wrong.

What Good A School of Education Can Do

To many people, a School of Education is simply where you go to become a teacher. Ordinarily, I rise to argue against such oversimplification. The School of Education I know best is, after all, a part of a university, and its scholarship and research activities carry it far beyond the training of teachers. On the other hand, in the vigilant defense of academic status, some important aspects of our obvious teacher training role have been ignored.

Indeed, people do come to a School of Education to become teachers. But should this be so? The answer is certainly not that only here can one learn what it takes to be a teacher, for there is nothing that can be learned in university classes or programs that can’t be learned outside the university. It might be more difficult or time-consuming elsewhere, but not impossible. The reason people usually come to a School of Education is that the learning must be certified to have taken place. There must be witnesses. And they can’t be just any witnesses; these witnesses must be specially competent to determine whether the needed learning has taken place; these witnesses must discriminate between those who have mastered the requirements and those who haven’t.

Why a School of Education? The common answer is that its faculty, having studied as scholars the nature of teaching, are clearly the best witnesses to the education of prospective teachers. If a local school official wants to find a good teacher, he needs only to find a candidate endorsed by the community of scholars at a good School of Education.

That rationale, with the inevitable bureaucratic superstructure, is the basis of the current New York State system of teacher certification. On behalf of society, the State certifies that a given person is appropriately ethical, educated, and professionally trained to be a teacher. And it certifies these things based on the recommendation of a School of Education. (The School of Education itself is also "certified" by the State, but that’s another story.) However, it is all too readily apparent that something is wrong in this scheme of things. Embarrassingly, though duly certified, some teachers seem to be neither ethical, educated, nor well trained. Embarrassingly, many high school graduates lack minimal literacy. And even back in the university, there is disagreement and confusion about fundamental questions such as what constitutes good education or training, how to tell who has it, and even whether it makes any difference whether a teacher has the training or not. In short, the certification process doesn’t seem to have completely fulfilled its avowed purpose of insuring that society will have good teachers.

What is now a problematic certification system seems destined to become an even worse licensure system. It is bad enough that there are too many students running around the university seeking not necessarily an education but the accumulation of a lot of academic scrip. But at least they are running around a place where they might stumble into something that could get them to think better. The State Regents, however, are now cultivating a proposal to remove control of teacher education from the academy—where one is obliged at least to appear intellectually motivated—to an appointed professional licensure board—which is obliged merely to appear inscrutable.

The proposed new rationale is that not scholars, who think about education, but professionals, who practice it, are the best judges of what makes a good teacher. The idea behind this is that teaching is a profession like law or medicine, professions so abstrusely far from an ordinary person’s capacity to understand that they must form their own monitoring organizations to judge competencies and maintain ethical practices. Aside from the serious question of whether law and
medicine should be organized that way, the more immediate question is whether teaching is at all like law or medicine. In my opinion, teaching’s claim to specialized skills, techniques and knowledge analogous to the expertise required of those practicing law and medicine is, at the very best, tenuous. For virtually every principle of education advanced by a “leader in the field,” there is another leader affirming the opposite. And how often, in the dailiness of public school and, indeed, university classrooms, are so-called professional techniques put aside to release the intuitive creativeness of a first-rate teacher? Notwithstanding the aforementioned, teaching does share one attribute with other professions—its professional self-interest. Judging by the interest and involvement of teachers’ unions in the licensure movement, this is a significant factor. The grip of the profession on both its members and its clients would become formidable. College students will have to continue the exercise of running around the academy rustling up credits; professions protect their exclusiveness by maintaining barriers to admission, so the academic hurdles will continue to be useful. But those students would now have to continue the exercise throughout their careers, for despite the lack of evidence that even the initial training of teachers makes a significant difference, the proposal for the new system includes enthusiastic requirements for on-going, inservice training, for which there is even less evidence of effectiveness. And once power and authority are consolidated within the professional board, it will be possible to manipulate not only who and how many may teach, but also how lucrative it is to teach.

Such criticism of the licensure proposal may seem fishy coming from someone who would have quite a lot to lose if the process of approving teachers were to be removed from schools of education; however, the change I would like to propose instead diminishes the academic role of approval even more than licensure would. I propose that teacher approval be put in the hands of local school boards and their constituencies. In making this proposal, I am exposing two very difficult admissions which go against the dogma of many generations: first, the admission that “experts” can’t produce and guarantee good education; and, second, that communities have shirked what is after all their inescapable responsibility, the responsibility of raising their children.

I’ve already discussed some of the reasons that make the first of these admissions necessary. I think these reasons are sufficiently nagging that few in the education business would strenuously insist that they can deliver an exclusive “expertise.” That is, while there are always new plans and programs from professors or Regents, they are, at their most optimistic, minor adjustments of the present unsatisfactory educational system. No one claims that any scheme, whether of certification or licensure, will result in the sort of universal education of which we hear in commencement speeches. But part of the reason for the failure of experts has to do with the second admission. In permitting experts to design and control teaching, the people have attempted to pass a buck which must stop with them. Neither the purposes nor content of education are “discoveries” made in a specialized research setting; they must flow from the community as an expression of vital concerns. Not even military education can succeed without agreement and support of the people, as we may have learned from the bitter experience of Vietnam. Surely no one would blame our failure to train willing and spirited soldiers for that conflict on any inadequacy of training techniques or training personnel.

Thus, the community seems best able to decide what types of teaching and teachers it wants—not only because it is capable of making the judgment but, more importantly, because the judgment can only be meaningful if made by the community. At the very least, such a community would get the teachers it deserves. But it would also be more likely to get the education its children deserve. It is my impression that it is felt by more than a few people that, under the present system, there are many who would be excellent teachers but are not permitted to teach, and that there are many certified teachers who should find a less destructive way to make a living. It is felt that an involved and thoughtful community would soon learn to distinguish qualifications from credentials. Although the process of learning can seem mysterious or even miraculous, successful education must almost by definition be recognizable to the society which seeks to impart it. In this sense, education must not be permitted to seem the province of inscrutable experts.

What I have been urging has grave implications for schools of education and state education systems. If communities can choose freely, the academy will no longer be the gatekeeper. Of course, enrollments would be bound to decline, at least in the short run. But even these unwelcome consequences may turn out for the best. Schools of education may stop chasing non-academic goals and start taking education more seriously. Though, so far, I have had only harsh words for the academy, there is another side. In our studies of teachers and teaching we have learned quite a lot. But it is not the kind of knowledge that can place a guaranteed-successful teaching mechanism in the local classroom. The knowledge we have is useful, not in accomplishing but in understanding the job of teaching. If a school of education must pay a price—diminished economic and political power—in order to turn to the exciting work of understanding education, it seems to me that would be a victory.

What I have been getting at is the idea that education is good for its own sake, and is the proper mission of any college and university. And I have also tried to say that, while they have some significance, degrees and credentials have been terribly overrated and often misapplied. In order to deal with these issues we have to recognize that schools of education and their faculties have a serious conflict of interest which, to be resolved sensibly, will require us to think a little more about society and a little less about ourselves. That is, while we all concede that society would benefit tremendously if people were not so obsessed with degrees, some of us would be out of work if they weren’t.

In creating and participating in the myth of expertise, the myth that our degrees must be bought to avert the world going to illiterate pieces, we have come very close to fooling all of the people all of the time. But I suspect that we have not quite fooled ourselves. I have hope that we can still make the difficult choice. We should turn down not only the new
bad idea of a teacher licensure system, but give up our old bad idea of the current certification system as well. We should leave job recruiting and teacher selection to those who call the tune and pay the bills—the citizens. If we did this we would have everything important to gain—the freedom to concentrate on the only work that makes schools of education genuinely valuable, learning about education and educating their students.

What Harm A School of Education Can Do

I appear to be preoccupied with licensure and certification, but what is at the heart of my concern is the very degree itself. Licenses and certificates can do mischief. Degrees do even more mischief. There is too much riding on that symbol of accomplishment. There may be too much invested to garner such an award. And it seems to me that it is all because most of us trust experts so much that virtually everyone believes one's future depends on getting the degree, or license, or some sort of official endorsement to be other than a manual laborer. Licenses and degrees are what people spend the first third of their lives going after. The blue collar worker goes after admittance to the plumbers' union. Another person wants a barber's license. And a third waits on the Civil Service line until his number is called so he can be anointed police officer, or fireman, or mailman. But even if they don't work diligently at other things, those who strive the longest and sweat the most, and invest the greatest amount of hard dollars, are the young men and women who attend the university with expectations that the good life follows those four years of expensive and, often, boring classes. Except for Jencks, Illich, and a few others, hardly anyone dares tell the American citizen that college isn't the only key to the good life. For many people, probably for the majority of us today, literally everything depends upon going to college and, better yet, going to a "good" college.

It is just because college is so important to so many people that society needs to be protected from this monstrous part of its beautiful creation. As long as the license, the certificate, the job and, especially, the prestige associated with a college degree remain, we will need some type of a system in the university to "police" things. That system is never called surveillance and certainly never thought of as policing, but it is the same thing even though we use such terms as requirements, distributions, credits, and hours. Just because a university degree means in our century what knighthood meant five hundred years ago, society must be assured that business interests are kept in check, and that reputable universities don't succumb to the easy dollars which would flow into their coffers if they would only think of themselves as businesses instead of centers of higher learning. Because colleges and universities are always in need of more dollars, they need to be watched very carefully lest they become corrupt. It's all right for them to do business, but they must never be businesses.

Notwithstanding, policemen just won't do in universities. Therefore, we have requirements which are officially overseen by deans, department chairmen, faculty, registrars, and other officials, but are really upheld from day to day by the people who are counted upon to make the university work—secretaries and clerks. Those requirements are necessary because so much depends on the degree or the certificate. Requirements are an invention of the professors, even though once or twice removed. And, although the professors invented the degrees, although they probably had something to do with the certificates, the larger society also had contributed a great deal to make those things important. That is why colleges are preoccupied with degrees and credit hours, because both those inside and those outside agree as to their importance. Of course, if we only had the degrees and the certificates, but if they weren't life or death matters, we wouldn't need the requirements. People would go to the university for the same reason they go to the library, or play tennis, or go to the theater: Because they enjoy the activity, or feel it benefits them in some manner. They would go to the university because that was what they wanted to do. But for the most part, people today don't go to the university because they want to be there; of that much, I am certain. But why can't people be trusted to do what is right for themselves and, in fact, what they sometimes know is right for society? For one thing, we are silly. For another, we exaggerate ourselves and our importance, and the nature of problems and solutions. For a third, we aren't modest. But most importantly, it is because it is not in God that we trust but in the professional.

I have already suggested some reasons why we think we need examinations. And indeed, I find myself reluctantly agreeing with that belief. Nevertheless, examinations do mischief. Why do we keep them? The frequent answer is that, in today's big and impersonal world, it would be difficult for most teachers to know when to pass a student without some reliance on examinations. While there is no need for a mother to "examine" a baby before he is taken off the nipple, and while she usually knows the baby well enough to know what needs to be done on his behalf, teachers have too many pupils to know them without formally examining them. Knowing somebody well obviates the need to "examine" that person, except of course for ritualistic purposes. And that brings me to schools of education. Schools of education engage in a great deal of ritualistic examination—that is, when there is nothing substantial to examine, or when the examiner doesn't have a firm grasp of the question, the answer, or both. Surely, there are good times to hold ritualistic examinations: Confirmation time, when confessing, or when pledging allegiance. But I see little advantage in holding ritualistic examinations and trying to fool everyone and yourself into believing that they are real examinations, such as when examinations are held to determine teachers' certifications or licensures. Consequently, it is proper for Catholics and Jews to ritually examine their neophyte priests and rabbis. And I think it is a good thing that drivers are examined and licensed as well as barbers, lawyers, accountants and examiners. But as I said earlier, I don't think it is any more practical and desirable to license teachers than it is to license poets, priests, painters, mothers, fathers, children, or chairmen of boards.

Because mothers love their children, they know them well enough not to need an examination to know them better. But
of course, Education is like a wild beast; it doesn’t know enough to make much use of general examinations. Yes, there are many facts connected to our fields of education. And they are for the most part necessary to know. And we should want more of them. But the facts are not enough. To be enough, they must be part of a coherently arranged whole. And they must make unambiguous sense together before we should require their study in order to be licensed. Without a coherent whole, what will a license signify? What skill must the applicant demonstrate which will make him unique among those not licensed? And the same question can be asked about degrees. Special examinations for degrees in Education—as distinct from examinations in courses—are in important instances not substantially more relevant than examinations for licenses.

Why can’t the university and the State do away with some of their foolish or unnecessary examinations? Teachers want to know when to pass a student in a school’s big and impersonal world. So unfortunately they resort to examinations. But why is the teacher’s world big and impersonal? The mother’s world is the same site as the teacher’s, but she can know her baby. A big and impersonal society does not entail—that is, does not require— impersonal relationships among any given individuals. If I want to talk about what harm a School of Education does, I have the topic here: It promulgates impersonality. One of the consequences of an impersonal environment is that the authority is supposed to know best. In the mother and baby example, it isn’t certain who knows best; it’s only clear that the right thing is done at the right time. Probably, most mothers don’t know when to take the baby off the nipple, but the baby knows and takes himself off. And if she is indeed the one to take him off, it’s with respect to what she knows about herself (there is no more milk in the breast) and not the baby. In an impersonal environment, the other person analogous to the baby doesn’t have the right to make such crucial decisions.

Because we in Education do not know enough to give comprehensive examinations, we should not be quick to abandon discrete courses and examinations of narrow topics. The accumulation of those examinations may say something about how well someone learns bits and pieces of information, and how diligent the person is about his schoolwork. But they will not say much that speaks to generalized skills, application of skills, and conceptual development. So we had better think not so much about whether we should throw out discrete courses (because, for the life of me, I can’t figure out what to do in their place), than what they mean and what value we should assign to them. And if we get smart, we might not only rely more on testing bits and pieces and the various theories in college classes, but we may decide to leave the testing of pedagogical skills to those who do such work best, practicum supervisors.

Because I cannot make a substantial case for one type of examination over another, and I am not sure who can, you should know that I do not intend to convince you about anything. Nevertheless, I want to put so-called ritualistic examinations in their place. I also want to say something about theory tests, which are usually thought about as given in college classrooms; and then, I want to discuss skills tests, rightly or wrongly thought about as those taken in the “real world.” Ritualistic examinations aren’t examinations at all. They merely look like examinations. That’s what the ritual is all about. Priests and rabbis are not examined. They are confirmed or affirmed or acclaimed or proclaimed. It’s a rite of passage, such as what happens to the Catholic child at confirmation or the Jewish child at bar mitzvah. And confession is not a test, but a required performance. Indeed, it is explicitly assumed to be a performance of which everyone is capable. Hence, its execution depends solely on the will of the confessor. And poets, and mothers too, are examined the same way, not to determine what they know, but to affirm the importance and responsibility of a role which they assume. The marriage ceremony contains the elements of such an examination. Make no mistake, in a very real sense these ritualistic examinations are extremely important. Therefore, if we are interested in maximizing the likelihood that teachers and PhDs, as well as priests and mothers, will properly fulfill their roles in the future, shouldn’t we want ritualistic examinations for those people too? That is, shouldn’t we want not only a demonstration of competence (which we can’t seem to get often) but a promise (which we can)? The licensure examination, or the course examination, might tell us whether the person knows enough to do it, but only a promise can be relevant to whether he will do it, or will try to do it. However, because it’s obviously relevant whether teachers or PhDs can do certain things, and because we know that promises are often broken, and because there are more ways we have today to measure competence, we focus virtually all of our professional training and scrutiny on this aspect of the examination process. But in fact, in practice, inadequate performance by teachers, doctors, barbers, or rabbis almost never can be attributed to lack of ability or competence (at least I believe this, and I think there are even data to support that belief). Certainly with teachers and mothers, the problem is not that they refuse to do the right thing but that their lives have evolved in such a way that what they know doesn’t work as it should. For various reasons, the academic-professional world is impervious to this fact. With the traditions we have developed to prepare scholars, we actually aggravate those aspects of one’s preparation which can be put in the category marked “developing a way of life.” For example, we deliberately identify a “terminal degree,” thus generating the impression that being an educated person is something which one achieves, like the rank of a general or a king. Worse still, the behaviors which are required for taking the throne are not the kind of behaviors which an educated person should cultivate. The appropriate elements of character are either suppressed or corrupted, while non-scholarly character is enforced and cultivated. The one bright spot in our practices is that we are really bad at them; we are not powerful enough really to extinguish human intelligence, high purpose, and altruism. Despite the absurd mechanical manipulations of the academic process, despite stupid research and expository literature, we certify good teachers (now and again). Our best students “read the university’s mind,” and give the university what it wants, then they learn for
their own sakes. But turning out good scholars and teachers shouldn't come as any satisfaction to the university because the people of whom it can truly be proud have read a stupid mind.

I now proceed to theory and skills tests. Most of us believe that theory is cultivated and best examined in the classroom. And there is a fair amount of support for the idea that teaching competency should be examined in the children's schoolhouse, in the same way that physical competency is examined in the gymnasium, and technical competency is examined in the laboratory. But what has not been clear is how far we can go in ascribing certain qualities to an individual once we know something about his other qualities. For example, if a college student does well in a course on learning theory, can we assume he will do well in helping someone to learn? I don't think we should count upon our capability to predict practice from knowledge or, for that matter, to predict behavior under certain circumstances from prior behavior under other circumstances. For one thing, while teaching competence should be examined in the schoolhouse, to be in the schoolhouse means a lot more than to walk through a schoolhouse. The practice is just as much a simulation as a computer model. For another thing, theory is no more cultivated in the college classroom than teaching skill in the children's classroom; both are toyed with in simulated environments. More unfortunately, we seem to be at greater ease while not working at making the simulated environments more real. We create hypothetical classrooms and hypothetical classroom data, and we analyze such data thoroughly, obtaining a theoretical understanding from fiction. That seems to be preferable to going into actual—if not totally natural—classrooms. We avoid observing and examining children in school. Simulation seems to be in demand because it is reputed to be even better than the real or near-real thing, in such demand that people forget that simulated answers to hypothetical questions aren't anywhere near the real thing. That's why people in Education spend a lot of time constructing questions that ask those simulated questions designed to give answers that come from daydreams, we don't ask the hard questions, such as, "What do you think about your opportunities to learn?" or "What do you think about when you think about your work?" We live our lives as if the statistical view of reality is reality, and as if an imagination is the perfect substitute for a memory and an observation. So while I bemoan the fact that not even are college classrooms good enough to work at theory, and not even are real children's classrooms good enough to work at skills, I am appalled at our disdain for those next best things.

As I said earlier, I can't make a case for one kind of examination versus another. That business entails questions about the very nature of rationality in life. Consequently, I return to the situation that seems to be getting worse and worse, the substitution of diplomas, licenses, and credits for education. A few people think that the university is the place to get an education and, incidentally, a degree too. Of course, professors, academic administrators, even students, will want to be counted on the high road in response to that comment. Yet, not only students, but professors and administrators, behave as if only degrees and credits count, as if we are too busy to pursue an education for its own sake, as if education is the luxury and the degree the necessity, which is my biggest worry about the university. This "disease" is what I fear can eventually take over the university, and change it into something academically unrecognizable but commercially as common as General Motors and McDonald's. Look at what has happened to sports in our society, big in every way except purpose.

There are few better times to observe degree-chasing than when a school attempts to find new markets for its wares. Today, schools of education are trying to interest international students, second-career students, and in-service and non-degree students. The assumption is that the products will remain the same but the students will be different. The truth of the matter is that, if the products remain the same, we will not get the non-degree students and we will continue to get many of the other students for the wrong reasons. This is why it would be important for a school of education not only to invite different types of students to join it but to invite them to join it in order to learn with it and not only to take degrees from it. Furthermore, some of those students will have absolutely no interest in credits, licenses, or degrees. It can well be those students who will serve to remind all the rest of us what the university is and why we are here. But we have a problem. What we now offer is not attractive to non-degree students. And not only are our products not attractive, we ourselves are hostile. In no uncertain terms, we always sell degrees but only sometimes education, and we offer packages and hardly ever single items.

By our emphasis on degrees, certificates, licenses, and official notice of everything that is undertaken in the name of education, we advertise what is important in our schools, which isn't learning but the achievement of status. For example, we have what is called terminal degrees, a goal which when achieved indicates that no further course work need ever be taken. As I said earlier, the end of the PhD ordeal is the end of courses, except in those few cases where a post-doctoral stage is defined, and then that becomes the terminal educational experience. Professors don't take courses. Why? Because they are finished with that phase of their lives. Education in the academy is finite and goal-directed. Of course the better professors pursue education on their own, but it would seem that all professors should need to take courses. Why don't they? Not because they have learned everything that they can learn from courses, and not because they have to devote all of their time to their own research. The reason they stop is because they have no more reason to continue. The answer to the question, "Why are you taking this course?" must be in terms of a program, a career, and a degree goal. Conversely, anything less than a degree is nothing. A PhD student who accumulates a hundred credit hours of straight A's is a failure unless his dissertation is completed and the degree awarded. The various consolation prizes—Master of Philosophy degree and Certificate of Advanced Study—are so associated with incompletion, at best, and disgrace more often than not, that people actually avoid accepting them. Everyone
knows that there is little consolation in an award that is a constant reminder of a failure.

While it seems appropriate to require a PhD for university professors since an important part of their work must be connected with scholarly activity, and while degrees probably add some assurance that doctors, lawyers, and teachers have achieved some minimal level of education, requiring degrees of everyone who goes to a university doesn't seem to make much sense. Of course, there would be hurried denials that universities are only for students who pursue degrees. But, as a matter of fact, there are very few people who think of themselves as university students who are not pursuing degrees. As a matter of fact, people who simply want to attend university classes because they enjoy learning and respect it for its own sake, do not think of themselves (because they are not thought of) as bona fide university students. Consequently, if a university wants to recruit non-degree students, it must find some way to express greater regard for those people. For example, they should not be called “non-degree students,” and thus be identified by what they are not rather than by what they are. Such people should be identified by what they do in the university and should have as personally clear a set of academic goals as others in degree programs. A problem that I have no solution to is how the university should recognize the academic accomplishments of such people. Exactly because they are engaging themselves in various courses and activities for the sake of only that accomplishment, the university should pause especially to recognize individuals who want to know things simply because it is good for people to know things. The student who seeks to know for its own sake should be as much valued as the professor who may accept promotion as a reward for his scholarship, but doesn’t pursue his scholarship merely to be promoted.

What I have tried to say in this paper is that the university seems to be getting more and more into the business of holding degrees, certificates, and now licenses, over people’s heads. If that sort of thing continues much further, we are going to become a real business, if we’re not now. What with donors who are paid off with honorary degrees, what with teachers who are held as hostages until they buy enough credits to get their pass to permanent employment, what with our disdain for people who want to use the library but not our classrooms or want to attend lectures but not pursue degrees, we behave suspiciously like encyclopedia salesmen who sell paper, binding, and book racks. But it stops there! Anything educational that transpires between the buyer and the books doesn’t at all involve the goal or the work of the salesman. (And I sometimes think, it doesn’t enough involve the publishers themselves.) If the university is like the encyclopedia salesman, it should say so. If it is merely the middle man, it should let the world know. But if it sees its primary mission to facilitate teaching and learning, it must make education its necessary main business, and it must make business an activity only when necessary. We must better comprehend the distinction between doing business and being in business.

REFERENCES