

A STUDY OF THE GPA PERSPECTIVE
AMONG STUDENTS AT A TWO-YEAR
INSTITUTION

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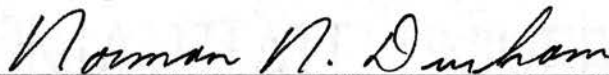
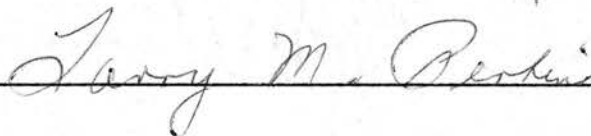
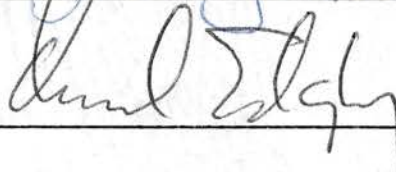
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

What cannot be understood cannot be managed intelligently.
(J. Dewey, Human Nature and Conduct)

This study will focus on producing insights into the conduct of people as students in the beginning stages of their higher education. Specifically, it will focus on understanding the development of student perspectives in the first year of college. What this study will not do is consider behavior from a cause/effect viewpoint, nor will it attempt to create a model capable of prediction.

In order to manage intelligently in higher education, a greater understanding must be sought of student conduct and behavior. This understanding would grow immensely if at least periodically the research focus moved away from attempting to establish cause/effect or predictive models of student behavior and instead would consider student behavior as the individual complex and diverse phenomenon, and yet, fully integrated, on-going social act that all human behavior is. Blumer (1969) supplied a framework for productive research in human behavior when he stated, "respect the nature of the empirical world and organize a methodological stance to reflect that respect" (p. 60). To respect the complexity of human behavior and specifically student behavior is to understand the meanings which individuals create and sustain as they go about being, in this case, students. Only through actual contact can

the world of the student be explored and understood and ultimately reflected in a meaningful way, thus giving substance to student behavior.

The framework for understanding student behavior is within the view that students create and sustain their own behavior and that human society is a process of people interacting (Manis & Meltzer, 1972). Student conduct is directed toward building meaning within social acts. Students, like all other human beings, do not construct meaning in isolation. Meaning is developed individually and only in on-going interactions with others. Yet, prior to specific meanings being constructed, an individual through previous interactions and the creation of meanings develops ideas, desires, intentions, attitudes and values which enable him/her to interpret acts of others and map-out lines of behavior which are available. Several sociologists who are Symbolic Interactionists identify the above as perspectives. Shibutani (1972) described perspectives as norms within specific reference groups which serve as anchoring points in the individual's perceptual field. He goes on to say, "people continuously support one another's perspectives, each by responding to the other in expected ways" (p. 164). Essentially, perspectives are viable because they work and are continually reinforced in interactions. Becker, Geer, Hughes, and Strauss (1961) used the same term and in their classic work Boys in White defined perspectives as

a coordinated set of ideas and actions a person uses in dealing with some problematic situation . . . a person's ordinary way of thinking and feeling about and acting in such a situation. These thoughts and actions are coordinated in the sense that the actions flow reasonably from the actor's perspective, from the ideas contained in the perspective. Similarly, the ideas which might form the underlying rationale for the person's action and are seen by the actor as providing a justification for acting as he does (p. 34).

What individuals do based on their perspectives supplies the basis for the empirical analysis of why people do what they do. The argument in this proposal is that analysis of individual perspectives which are only developed in interaction with others will provide useful understandings of the conduct of the group of individuals studied. This can be accomplished only by talking with those individuals and getting to know the place in which the development of perspectives occur.

Student behavior is both individually varied and simultaneously very similar to many other students. The concept of perspectives provides a valuable avenue to pursue in trying to understand student behavior. It allows us to see how the student subculture can and does develop a widely accepted and used definition of the situation (Thomas, 1964) and also assists us in realizing that the student perspective is built up from individual meanings which students construct within the situation. Last, perspectives can be seen as the base from which diverse individual interpretation and action stems. Student perspectives are both a group phenomenon and an individual expression, and to understand this allows us to form a complex insight into what is indeed complex, student behavior.

Statement of Problem

Human conduct is complex. Institutions are only humans in interaction. Perspectives can only arise and be sustained in interaction. In order to discern the perspectives humans construct one ought to know, not know about, the situation and the humans involved. There are a number of valuable questions to be answered through personal interaction

with students. What perspectives do students use to make sense of their academic life at college? Is college an experience that holds interactions which change student perspectives, or do those interactions sustain perspectives already in existence? Do grades have important meaning for students?

One perspective from which this research can be viewed was provided by Barbara Tye (1987). She discussed the idea of schools as having a "deep structure" (p. 281). While her description was of public high schools, its application can be seen for college. She spoke of each school's uniqueness, yet she pointed out that essentially each school was the same at the deepest and most important levels. The reason for this sameness is that certain ideas are held in common by us concerning what school/education ought to be. She does not use the word perspective, but it seems appropriate to see the deep structure as an idea that affects perspectives. How deep and persuasive are the perspectives that give meaning to the academic life at college?

Perspectives

Becker and others in two classic works, Boys in White and Making the Grade, developed the concept of perspective and provide an initial classification of types of general perspectives students develop in college. Within the concept of student perspectives, Becker saw three aspects: academic, organizations, and relationships (Becker, Geer, and Hughes, 1968). While each aspect influences development of the other two, it is possible to focus on one aspect of the total student perspective and at appropriate points take cognizance of the impact the other two aspects may have on the one being considered or to consider

the impact the one being focused upon has on the other two. The concern in this study was the perspectives students developed toward the academic work. Becker titles this aspect the "GPA perspective" (p. 33). Becker goes on to define the GPA perspective as

the reflection in student conduct which the environmental emphasis on grades impose. It describes the situation in which students see themselves working, the rewards they should expect from their academic work, the appropriate actions to take in various circumstances, the criteria by which people should be judged and relevant conflict in goals (p. 33).

Thus, a refinement of the original statement of the problem is, to study the perspectives that students develop toward their academic work, which shall be referred to in the same manner as Becker, "the GPA perspective."

The Situation

Rather than use the term "environment" for the setting in which this research was carried out, the term "situation" shall be used. Environment, much like value, is overused and has taken on very broad and general meanings. It lacks the contextual specificity needed so that qualitative research can have a focus from which to proceed. Mead (1934) speaks of there being no pre-existent environment and of any environment existing only in the interactions that occur between individuals. The above statement gives credence to using the term "situation" and to its ability to represent the specific context in which perspectives develop.

Thomas (1964) used the concept of "the definition of the situation" to explain the importance of individual and collective examination and deliberation that is prior to any self-determined act. In Chapter III

the definition of the situation will be discussed relative to the GPA perspective. However, at this juncture, the definition of the situation has importance in defining the situation in which this research occurred. Thomas went on to assert that many general types of situations are already defined. Do not mistake general situations as synonymous with the concept of structure. Symbolic Interactionism rejects the idea that structure exists independent of interaction. Thus, institutions exist only as embodied in commonly occurring social interactions among most members of a community or group which ultimately lead to a generalized social attitude toward those interactions which we call institutions (Mead, 1934).

With the above understanding, the final step of defining the situation in which the GPA perspective is to be studied can now be taken. What perspectives do students attending a two-year, nonresidential institution develop toward their academic work, and what influences do other perspectives have on the GPA perspective, as well as what impact does the GPA perspective have on other perspectives that students develop?

Importance of the Study

One of Becker's major findings in Making the Grade was that one's living group was especially influential in the development of the GPA perspective (Becker et al. 1968). If the premise is accepted that perspectives are the initial phases of the act and that all individuals use group specific perspectives, then how do students at two-year commuter institutions go about constructing perspectives in the absence

of living groups and within a situation in which few other significant groups exist?

CHAPTER II

THE SOCIOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT

It is thus with most of us; we are what other people say we are. We know ourselves chiefly by hearsay. (Eric Hoffer, The Passionate State of Mind).

What will be of most importance in this study outside of the analysis of the data is the theoretical context. It is in the tradition of George H. Mead and John Dewey and Symbolic Interaction that student perspectives are explored. Our uniqueness from all other forms of life is centered on the fact that we know we exist. We know ourselves to exist only when we can see ourselves through other's eyes (Mead, 1934). The me I come to know is the organized set of attitudes of others which I develop in interaction with others (Dewey, 1922 and Mead, 1934). It is only within interaction that meanings arise and are sustained, and meanings can only be seen in the response of the individual (Mead, 1934). These three ideas form the basis of this study's sociological view.

The major proposition of Symbolic Interaction is that man does not merely react to the world but handles his/her world through a defining process in which the individual acts on the basis of interpreting the acts of others and the fitting of his/her lines of action with other's action to form group action (Blumer, 1972 and 1970). Above all else, man is most definitely active, and only he/she determines the meanings of objects which are material and/or non-material. However,

meanings do not arise a priori within the individual. Meanings are constructed individually only in interaction with others (Stone & Farberman, 1970).

Yet man exhibits a regularity in human conduct which may appear to be rooted in a physiological structure or even thought to reside in a pre-existent societal organization. Constancy in human conduct does not reside in either of the above areas, but rather in customs and institutions which can be seen only as ongoing social processes capable of producing a great similarity in meanings among individuals (Stone & Farberman, 1970). Even then, for society the similarities in meanings are limited, often only group specific. The mechanism which appears to allow society to be held together is man's capability to fit divergent lines of action together for varied reasons. Man most generally is able to understand the meaning of other's acts through the process of taking the role of others, either a specific other or a generalized other, and adjusting his/her line of action to theirs (Blumer, 1972). Implicit within the process of role taking is the ability for an individual to view his/her own behavior reflectively. Blumer stated, "the socialized person is a society in miniature" (p. 164). What he means is that the reflective capabilities of the individual allow the individual to carry out the construction of meaning internally. It may appear that the individual is a-social, but reality is that his/her experience base with others is sufficient to allow interaction to occur between what Mead describes as the I and Me.

A final point concerning Symbolic Interaction concerns the existence of the self. Mead saw the self not as a structure but as a process which had many facets (Mead, 1934). The self that exists within

you is dependent on the current act in which you are involved. Related to the existence of multiple selves, Shibutani (p. 1972) asked an interesting question: "What impact does simultaneous participation in multiple groups have on perspectives" (p. 164)? In today's society every individual does indeed have membership in numerous groups. In each he/she is a different self and needs a different perspective. The group does define you chiefly in the way you interpret your interactions with them.

Stone and Farberman (1970) posed six questions to guide a symbolic interaction inquiry. These questions fit well as the methodology for this study.

- What is meaning?
- How does the personal life take on meaning?
- How does the meaning persist?
- How is the meaning transformed?
- How is the meaning lost?
- How is the meaning regained? (p. 1)

The importance of Symbolic Interaction in this study is that it allows for the diversity and complexity that typifies human behavior. Further, it clearly states that human behavior is more than a response to another's action, but instead is a sharing of one another's behavior out of which comes individual meaning (Manis and Meltzer, 1972). To understand how students construct and sustain perspectives toward academics in college is dependent on adopting a symbolic interaction approach.

Students entering college come with many selves already in existence, but what is of importance is to understand that the self that the student will come to know as the "college self" will arise only within the interactions that occur once college has begun. Even though some previous interaction patterns continue, such as his/her relationship with parents, the objective conditions will have changed. In particular, new relationships or interactions will begin the process by which the student redefines his/her other non-college self. Many a parent has said that John or Jane was not like this until he/she went to college. Dewey (1922) stated, "Conduct can be changed by changing the objective conditions" (p. 29). The most effective means of adjustment to this new environment is for the individual to be able to see him/herself in others. Mead (1934) called it the "taking of others' attitudes toward self thus becoming an object to self" (p. 100). The researcher's experience, which will later be argued for as a critical component in this study, as an academic advisor supported this view. Those who are most successful in college are those who can best see themselves through others. Feldman and Newcomb in The Impact of College on Students found the greatest impact on those open to new experiences and/or open to the influence of others. They were interested in what others thought of them.

The last area to be touched on concerning the sociological view is the collective nature of the act and the resulting meanings. Mead (1934) stated, "the behavior of an individual can be understood only in terms of the behavior of the whole social group to which he belongs" (p. 6). Dewey (1922) supported Mead when he stated, "all actions of the individual bear the stamp of the community" (p. 317). Two concepts are

critical to this study. One, the individual comes to know himself/herself only in the immediacy of the group. Two, the meanings that the individual develops are in fact a collective process arising from the interactions in which the person is involved. The collective process or action is not to be simply identified with collective behavior of the mob, but should be understood to apply more aptly to more enduring forms of joint behavior--what we commonly know as organizations and institutions (Becker et al. 1968). This does not intend to portray a Marxian determinism to individual behavior. Yet, the thesis is asserted that individual conduct can only be understood and is molded only within the context of interaction. An individual's reservoir of experience is filled only through the interactions with others.

If a snapshot is taken of individual action, which is what quantitative statistics does, it may appear isolated and unique, but the influence of others is present. What appears to be isolated, unique behavior is but the individual moving the previous interaction experiences with others into an internalized interaction between what Mead calls the Me and the I (Mead, 1934). Mead further asserted that individuals do in fact often act in more or less the same manner drawing upon what he calls "universals of different particular situations" (p. 90). Individuals do indeed have and regularly use their reservoir of experience. Where individuality does arise is in the reality that each individual reflects a different aspect of the relational pattern of the functional group to which he/she belongs (p. 201). In Chapter III, where perspectives are discussed and developed in depth, the importance of this sociological context will be evident.

Theoretical Context and Value Ladeness

"the myth of objective consciousness"

(Theodore Roszak, The Making of a Counter Culture)

We have no option but to represent some point of view. The choice is whether or not to be open about it (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). To claim to be value-free and thus totally objective is to claim our existence as a machine, and fortunately since that is absurd, the claim to being value-free is in reality a statement of an implicit value system. "Value-free is a delusion" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 170). Further, if I am, as are all human beings, value-laden, then our theories and even the facts we choose are value-laden. Maybe a more appropriate term would be that our theories and facts are value-determined (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

An immediate response from any good quantitatively oriented researcher is that objectivity can be obtained at the conscious level, and if there is any value-ladeness it resides at the unconscious level. The first value orientation is to reject the unconscious as having an existence, for it is too convenient a location to misplace values that impact upon conduct. The unconsciousness that most people refer to are the habits acquired under social influences of which they are unaware. Their reflective capability needs to be more fully developed. Dewey (1922) stated, "Individualism is not found in original nature but in habit acquired under social influences" (p. 318). A second value orientation related to the above is the belief that social action preceded the individual human being as he/she is known today. The individual arises only in society, and thus individual uniqueness is not

an isolated development but rather a social consequence of interaction. Consciousness is the individual becoming aware of group attitudes (Mead, 1934). A difference of function for individuals does not preclude a common experience (1934). We are different because of the group, not in spite of it.

A third value orientation is the belief that objectivity creates distance for the researcher between him/herself and the inner life of those he/she seeks to understand (Davis, 1977). It is the difference between knowing and knowing about. One ought to desire to know. This study was based in part on the belief in the perfectibility of the instrument, the human being. If the argument is made that humans as instruments are potentially biased, it seems ironic then that we could ever create any type of unbiased instrument such as a questionnaire. Refinement of any instrument is possible including a human being as data gatherer in qualitative research. Besides attempting to develop insights into student perspectives concerning grades, it is hoped that this study will contribute to the idea that qualitative research produces those insights most reflective of human behavior.

Rather than go on enumerating value orientations, an ending place is to state simply that this study is value-laden and that symbolic interaction is the home of those values. This home pushes the research toward face-to-face talk as the method of research and precludes avenues others might choose. Stewart Emery (1978) stated, "we create a reality that reflects our view of the world" (p. 39). The reality for this research is embodied in the methodology proposed. Yet, it is believed that Barton and Walker's (1978) central task of the sociology of education can be adequately met, which is "to reveal what constitutes

reality for the participant in a given situation and to explain how these participants came to view reality in that way" (p. 274).

A final value orientation is that multiple truths and understandings exist for every situation. The methodology proposed will yield truths and understanding capable of providing new and useful insights. Stake (cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985) said it well: "what is in fact true is that which is understood."

CHAPTER III

THE GPA PERSPECTIVE

Yet there is a common set of reactions which belong to all, which are not differentiated on the social side but get expression in rights, uniformities and common methods of action. (G. H. Mead, Mind, Self, and Society)

Becker et al. (1968) found perspectives to exist in several areas for students, and the existence of these perspectives facilitated their college experience. "Even though individual students used these perspectives to organize activity, their development was essentially a group phenomenon, coming into existence when members of a group found themselves sharing similar goals within a common experience" (p. 5).

The first element in the development of perspectives among students is the existence of a common frame of reference in which students can communicate. Students develop that universal discourse as they interact with one another, with teachers, and with other college officials and thus develop commonly held ideas (Becker et al. 1968). As interactions proceed in fact many situations arise within an institution to which students must respond. Meyrowitz (1985) spoke of the need for people to develop a single definition for each situation. Those singular definitions of the situation find their point of reference within three broad perspectives that students develop in response to their common experience, the GPA perspective, the organizational perspective, and the relationship perspective (Becker et al. 1968). While the focus of this study was on the GPA perspective, it was not done in isolation. The

other perspectives were concomitantly developing either within the same situations as the GPA perspective or possibly apart. Particular attention must be given to those times when two or more definitions of the situation arising from different perspectives merge to form that single definition of the situation. In no way is this merger simply additive, for a whole new set of interactions will arise (Meyrowitz, 1985). Yet, it must be remembered that it does occur within the student's common frame of reference and makes sense to him/her. It quite simply enables them to communicate more effectively and efficiently .

A second element in the development of perspectives among students is the relationship between long-range and immediate perspectives. "Long-range perspectives are those which have brought the individual into the immediate situation" (Becker et al. 1961, p. 35). Going to college in order to get a better paying job is an example of a long-range perspective. In this area, students' initial perspectives are so similar that the development of immediate perspectives are more apt to arise from the immediate situation (Becker et al. 1968). Something missing in this view is the idea of intermediate perspectives. Dewey (1922) stated, "until one takes intermediate acts seriously enough to treat them as ends, one wastes one's time in any effort of change of habits" (p. 35). It is not enough to have only a long-range perspective involving valuing a college education for its generally perceived benefits; one must have an idea of how to put that college education to use. Selecting a major would be an effective intermediate perspective which would facilitate the development of immediate perspectives. Experience in higher education would indicate that intermediate

perspectives are like immediate perspectives in that they primarily arise and are sustained within the actual college experience. The focus of this study was specifically on the immediate perspectives students develop. As with Becker et al. (1968) the analysis was concerned with the development of the three immediate perspectives focusing in particular on the GPA perspective. The long-range and intermediate perspectives were considered only in respect to their impact on immediate perspectives of students.

Components of Immediate Perspectives

Student perspectives can be divided into three broad components. First, there is the definition of the situation, "a set of ideas describing the character of the situation in which action must be taken" (Becker et al. 1968, p. 29).

The most important features in students' definition of the situation are the following: a statement of the goals one can reasonably strive for in the situation; a description of the organization within which action occurs and the demands they make on participants; the rules, both formal and informal, by which one's action is constrained; and the rewards and punishment one may look forward to as a consequence of his performance (p. 29).

Second, there is a specification of the kinds of activities a student may engage in given the situation as they define it (1968). Third, there is the students' emphasis on criteria of judgment against which they measure themselves and others (1968).

Within the student perspective exists a general goal of gaining maturity and becoming an adult. Becker et al. (1968) stated, "to manage one's college life properly shows that one has what it takes to be a mature adult, for the problems of college life are seen much more like

those of the adult world than anything that has come before" (p.31). For the student, this drive toward maturity means being able to balance the academic, organizational, and relationship aspects of his/her college life appropriately. The question for students becomes one of does a mature person devote all of his/her time and effort to just one of several major aspects of college or does he/she arrive at what for them is the right balance (Becker et al. 1968)? This general goal may have much to do with a student's long-range perspective and assisting in keeping immediate perspectives in balance.

The GPA Perspective Defined

Grades are the major institutional value; "they are the currency of the campus" (Becker et al. 1968, p. 55). Thus, it should be no surprise that grades are what students organize their behavior around. Intellectual development, while spoken of highly (mainly by non-students), is in fact not formally integrated into the institutional value system. Becker et al. (1968) went on to state that learning may actually interfere with the getting of good grades. Becker et al. (1968) found that "students demonstrate their maturity and competence as adults through the GPA perspective rather than through intellectual pursuits" (p. 80). Interestingly, though, students do not want what Becker called "pud courses," which are those courses where faculty give grades away. Students want grades to be valuable because it is their currency of trade; they want grades to have substance within this GPA perspective.

The GPA perspective is defined as:

Definition of the situation

1. The college is so organized that one can neither remain as a student nor graduate without receiving adequate grades. Furthermore, a number of other rewards that students desire cannot be achieved without sufficiently high grades.
2. A successful student, one who is achieving maturity in college, will "do well" in his academic work, however "doing well" is measured, thus demonstrating that he is capable of meeting the demands of the environment and also opening the way to success in other areas of campus life.
3. Doing well in academic work can be measured by the formal institutional rewards one wins. Since the major academic rewards are grades, success consists of getting a "good" grade point average.
4. Intellectual or other interests may suggest other rewards than grades to be sought in academic experience. Where the actions necessitated by the pursuit of grades conflict with other interests, the latter must be sacrificed.

Actions

5. To be successful a student should do whatever is necessary to get "good grades," expending no effort on any other goal in the academic area until that has been achieved.

Criteria of judgment

6. Since any student who wants to can achieve adequate grades, failure to do so is a sign of immaturity. Grades, can therefore be used as a basis of judging the personal worth of other students and of oneself.
7. Faculty members may be judged, among other ways, according to how difficult they make it to achieve adequate or "good" grades (Becker et al. 1968, p. 34).

This definition does not imply a unitary standard for all students. The grades that are acceptable to students vary, and not every student follows or accepts every aspect of the above definition. Becker et al. (1968) did put forth two features that cause most students to accept it. First, it is a realistic way to orient oneself toward the academic side of college. Second, it is the perspective everyone accepts at least to

some degree. There are a few who appear not to follow this perspective. For example, some students are able to satisfy their need for good grades, feel little pressure working for grades per se and may elect intellectual pursuits. Another group may best be explained by a quote from Dewey (1922): "acting as a self does not always mean acting for self" (p. 136).

To return to the beginning of this chapter, remember that perspectives grow out of the common experiences students are exposed to while in college. In addition, since the situations are unique, the perspective that develops is unique to the students attending college. While long-range and intermediate perspectives exert an influence on immediate perspectives, it is primarily the influence of college in general and specifically the academic side of college that generates the GPA perspective. A perspective should be understood as a somewhat defined set of ideas and conventional practices, either explicit or implicit, that effectively guide student conduct.

The pictures one should have, then, is of students going about their daily activities, arriving at joint definitions of situations and problems, working out solutions in the light of their common understanding of the situation, and engaged in what seem to them to be appropriate actions--all of this informed by and carried on in the context of the body of collectively held ideas and collectively enacted patterns of activity that we have called a perspective. (Becker et al. 1968, p. 37).

CHAPTER IV

METHODOLOGY

The lone, unorganized investigator will always have a crucial role to play, being the main generator of ideas and initiator of new departures. Thus, one may say that the most essential research activity has already been carried out by the time research teams are composed.

(Nevitt Sanford, The American College)

Introduction

This study was one small attempt at inductively arriving at a greater understanding of student behavior. While Dewey's view that "man is not logical" is accepted, it is asserted that man is rational in his actions--rational in the sense of Mead's "minded conduct." All student behavior is rational and worthy of empirical investigation. This study was begun with no prior assumptions or theories to be tested or proved. Instead the theories were to be developed directly from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Yet, this study was a disciplined inquiry. It was conducted and reported in such a manner that all aspects can be examined publicly and its logical arguments presented for debate (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). "The single most important fact of research is where it leads, not where it starts" (Bernstein, 1973, p. 221). While this study had a focus and a departure point, the path this study would follow, was not known in advance. If Dewey's view is accurate that the process is the

product of education, then the insights into and understanding of student behavior will develop along the path followed. The product will not be a constructed object at the end, but an accumulation of data that expands our insights into student behavior.

Feldman and Newcomb (1970), after a review of the mostly quantitative based research concerning college impact on students felt the need to withhold judgment about the nature and extent of the impact of college. They believed two problems had to be dealt with: "college impacts were not directly documented and averages or net changes obscured the actual process by which different students adapt in different ways" (p. 49). This is a direct request for qualitative research from two of the most widely cited researchers into student behavior.

In their classic study, Boys in White, (Becker et al. 1968) stated "we studied the matters which seemed to be important to the people we studied" (p. 20). The question from critics would be, how could this yield reliable or useful data? A retort would be that faculty are caught in an illogical situation of which they are largely unaware. Namely, they treat students as incompetent and immature, yet they must rely on the student's interpretive competencies to understand what is taught to them (Dreitzel, 1973). Besides students being rational, they are also able to interpret their experiences and perspectives for another person.

Thus, three elements emerge which influence the design of this study. One, students are capable of describing accurately behaviors that support and embody student perspectives. Two, there exists a need in research to have direct face-to-face contact with students so as to assess the validity of the existence of student perspectives and their

impact on student behavior. Three, I, as the instrument, am capable of disciplined inquiry.

The Design

Twenty-five new freshman students at the University of Wisconsin Center-Manitowoc County, Wisconsin, were to have been identified and engaged in four 30 to 60 minute interviews spanning their first year in college. Only thirteen of the original twenty-five students identified were interviewed. An explanation for diverting from the initial design is provided in Chapter Five. The initial thirteen students interviewed were selected by reviewing the records of all new freshmen and identifying those students who had between a 2.5 GPA and a 3.5 GPA in high school and had also scored between 20 and 26 on the ACT or were ranked in the top half of their high school class. Forty students in the freshman class met the criteria and were invited to participate, see Appendix A. The focus of these interviews was to discuss their adaptation to college, specifically the academic side of college and the development of the GPA perspective. The approximate timing of their interviews was September, November, March, and late May. While there was no specific protocol of questions, there were general areas which were covered with each student which were derived from the six basic questions of Symbolic Interaction outlined in Chapter II.

- What does it mean to attend college?
- What situations produce or influence the student's personal meanings of college?
- Who are the significant others in the student's life who influence his/her construction of what college is?

- What meanings does the student construct in relation to the academic side of college?
- What situations influence his/her definition of academics?
- Who are the significant others that influence a student's perspective toward academics?
- What is the student's long-range perspective in attending college, and what influences does it have on the academic perspective?
- What is the student's intermediate perspective in attending college, and what influence does it have on the academic perspective?
- What situations and interactions brought the student to the University of Wisconsin Center in Manitowoc County?
- What is the student's definition of good and/or adequate grades?
- What is the student's understanding of how college might impact his/her life?
- What activities does the student see as important to being successful in college, specifically in academics?
- What does a student do to be successful academically?
- What causes the meanings a student develops toward college to change?

However, the major intention was to follow their lead once the relationship was established and once they had an understanding of the research interest. To the degree possible, each interview was tape-recorded and transcribed. An emergent design strategy was employed where the previous interviews were continuously reviewed in order to modify the general areas of interest and the approach within the next interviews. The interviews were conducted away from an office area.

There were several areas that were away from traffic which provided a reasonably relaxed setting: e.g., corners of the cafeteria, a greenhouse, and study areas in the library and the career center.

While the focus of the methodology was interviews, the researcher had the opportunity to validate the interview information through observation and day-to-day interactions with students. As Director of Student Services the researcher was both near students and interacted with them continuously. Most importantly, the researcher had a one-on-one session with most entering freshmen as they prepared to enroll for the first time. The information gathered appeared natural to the position the researcher occupied. What made this a disciplined study, rather than a summary of an individual's work experience, is the theoretical context that guided the inquiry and its reporting.

A final element of the design was to be the selection of a similar group of students who would not be engaged in the first three interviews. They would have been interviewed only in May. One of the fundamental propositions of Symbolic Interaction is that only through interaction does change occur, this is also a fundamental proposition of naturalistic inquiry. Consequently, the process of being interviewed three times during the academic year might in itself have affected the development of the students' GPA perspective. The original intention of having a May only interview group was not met. As will be more fully explained in Chapter Five, the need to move in other directions seemed more appropriate.

Naturalistic Inquiry and Emergent Design

Lincoln and Guba (1985) asserted that the research paradigm must be resonant with the theoretical framework of the researcher. What follows is consistent with the symbolic interactionist view. There are five axioms to naturalistic inquiry which underlie the design.

- 1) There are multiple constructed realities.
- 2) The relationship between the knower and the known is inseparable, and they influence each other. The inquiry will change the behavior of the student.
- 3) Generalizations will be arrived at inductively. Hypotheses will be in the form of working hypotheses that describe the individual cases.
- 4) Casual linkages will be rejected, since one cannot distinguish cause from effect.
- 5) The importance and existence of values in the inquiry will be considered.
 - inquires influenced by inquirer.
 - inquiries influenced by choice of research paradigm.
 - inquiries influenced by choice of theory.
 - inquiries influenced by values inherent to context of study. (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 37)

In addition, there were fourteen characteristics of an operational naturalistic inquiry that were critical to the validity and reliability of the study:

- 1) Natural setting.
- 2) Human instrument--which is actually the only way to take into account biases of the inquiry.
- 3) Utilization of tacit knowledge by the researcher.
- 4) Qualitative methods--indepth interviews and sustained contact in this study.
- 5) Purposive sampling--subjects chosen for their value in gaining a greater understanding.
- 6) Inductive data analysis.

- 7) Grounded theory.
- 8) Emergent design.
- 9) Negotiated outcomes and meaning of data--before final draft you allow for subject review and confirmation of analysis.
- 10) Case study reporting mode--narrative.
- 11) Idiographic interpretations.
- 12) Tentative application--the need for replication.
- 13) Focus determined boundary--two-year institution, freshman, GPA perspective.
- 14) Special criteria for trustworthiness-
 - prolonged engagement, persistent observation.
 - triangulation of data from interviews, observation, tacit knowledge.
 - personal log explaining emergent design.
 - peer debriefing.
 - negative case analysis - a single negative case refuting the GPA perspective will challenge its validity.
 - referential adequacy - does the record support the analysis.
 - member check - do the subjects support the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Of special note is the first characteristic, natural setting. As Director of Student Services, the researcher occupied a position within the situation that students defined as one concerned with most of the elements of student perspectives. Specifically, the researcher's responsibilities as an academic advisor should convey a normal interest

in the academic side of a student's life. The researcher's presence should be a minimal disturbance factor.

Several considerations took precedence as this study proceeded in the naturalistic inquiry tradition. Research into human behavior cannot yield useful insights unless the subjects understand and cooperate in the study. Thus, the quality of the interaction must be high in order for the researcher, the instrument, to exploit fully the natural advantage inherent in being part of the 'fabric' of the situation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Second, fairness must come before objectivity (Lincoln & Guba). If thoughtfully considered, the previous sentence is redundant, for to be truly objective you must be fair. Yet, the need to state the obvious is appropriate when for the sake of scientific objectivity human beings have not at times been considered with the degree of humanness demanded. Last, "once in the field the study must take the form of successive iteration of four elements: purposive sampling, inductive analysis of data, development of grounded theory and projection of next steps in a constantly emergent design" (Lincoln & Guba, p. 187).

In particular, the concept of purposive sampling was important. Becker et al. (1988) in Making the Grade, due to location and date (early sixties), focused on white, middle class, fully admissible, 18 to 22 year old students. This study is purposefully limited to those same general characteristics. Specifically, students who are fully admissible to the University of Wisconsin-Manitowoc and are 18 to 22 years of age were identified for inclusion in this study. While the GPA perspective also exists for minority, older and unprepared students, and

it would be valuable to study these groups, this study attempted to use Becker's original study as a point of comparison. Further, the researcher's expertise is more fully developed with the traditional college attending group.

Within the interviews, the focus was on discovering ways in which individuals interpret other's acts and the manner in which the student defines the situation. In addition, through the four set of interviews the progressive development of the GPA perspective should reveal the process students experience. While many interpretations of data are idiographic, the value of this study is in the ability to discover similar patterns or commonalities in the development of the GPA perspective. A special area of attention is given to the moments of indecision or crisis in the student's academic life (Shibutani, 1972). If the person(s) who appear in the student's imagery can be identified, the significant other(s) will be seen, and this should lead to an accurate identification of where the GPA perspective arises. Also, if the group can be identified, it should provide information on the GPA perspective in general.

This study has a method and is well thought out. Its priority is not on quantification and technical detail. Instead, the priority is on making contact with other humans with the hope of producing understanding and gaining insight into human conduct that reflects the complexity of humans.

CHAPTER V

THE GPA PERSPECTIVE TODAY

If you don't have a good education, you're going to be a nobody. (Jose Gonzalez, father of a high school senior)

Introduction

The overwhelming impression that is left from this research is that the GPA perspective is alive and well among students. Not only is the above statement true for students at a two-year public institution, but it also applies equally well to students at a selective, private liberal arts college. A second impression which this researcher has come away from this project with is that grades need no explanation or special context within student interactions in order to be used to make decisions concerning effective lines of action.

Grades are completely understood in a very simple way. A sophomore student put it best when in reply to the question, "what do you think of grades," she responded without hesitation, "grades are it." This woman would be considered to be a student interested in more than just academics. She was treasurer for the student government and a student ambassador this past year. She consistently volunteered her time to help with set-up and clean-up for a variety of social activities. Many people would describe her as seeking a complete education and able to put grades in the proper perspective. Grades were held in the proper

perspective for her: they were the bottom line, around which all other perspectives were organized. She simply had a tremendous amount of energy, which allowed her to make grades "it" while maintaining her involvement in numerous other areas.

A third impression gained from this project is that the GPA perspective is developed before entrance into college. Thirteen students were initially interviewed in September of 1987. All of them were new freshmen. One of the principles of qualitative research was met immediately since redundancy of information was achieved starting with the second student interviewed in that first round. They all said essentially the same thing: grades are it. In addition, they all held the same view of college attendance, i.e., it is vocational preparation. Later it will be argued that these two perspectives fit together well and support each other. Even when the inquiry was expanded to another institution and to sophomores it produced the same message: grades are a powerful determinant of behavior, and only the immature person would ignore the GPA perspective.

Parents spoke of the existence of the GPA perspective and its development prior to college attendance. On a number of occasions this past year I would be in places where my dissertation topic would be a topic of conversation. It always seemed to be of interest and would elicit observations from parents of high school and college students. Jean, a college graduate and an employee of a liberal arts college, had a 17 year old daughter who, as a senior in high school, used the GPA perspective in deciding lines of action. Ted and Michelle were parents of a son who was a freshman at a Big Ten institution this past fall. Yet, even last summer the parents exhibited the existence and use of the

GPA perspective. They knew specifically their son's high school GPA, as well as what GPA he needed during his first two years of college in order to be admissable as a junior into the major he had chosen. A last parent provided insight into the interactions that begin to develop the GPA perspective. He spoke of attending an open house at the junior high school his eighth grade daughter attended. During this open house, the parents had an opportunity to trace through a typical day of classes for their child, spending 15 minutes in each class. He was amazed to find each teacher spending almost the entire 15 minutes explaining the grading procedures he/she used to evaluate his daughter and spending no time discussing content or behavioral outcomes of the class.

A final source of support for the third impression comes from the same article as the quote which began this chapter. "With a grade point average of 3.36, the question of college after high school for Stephen Gonzalez, 18, of Oak Creek, boiled down to money" (Vanden Brook 1988). If we come to know ourselves through interactions, then the author of the article has sent a powerful message to Stephen Gonzalez, for the above quote was the first sentence of that article. Grades are it. Stephen Gonzalez is a 3.36, first and foremost, only later in the article do we find out more about him. Thus, even Stephen's father's quote takes into account the GPA perspective. A good education can be defined by Stephen's GPA upon graduation.

A fourth impression comes from the significance students attach to college being vocational preparation for the future. The GPA perspective can best be seen as a sub-perspective within the dominant vocational preparation perspective. The GPA perspective is the immediate perspective which is of the most utility while in college. As

will be seen later in this chapter, it provides the perfect complement to the long-range perspective of vocational preparation. It appears from the interviews that the definition of the college experience has changed and become more narrow. Is college the social experience it was 30 years ago? The intensity with which students see college as vocational preparation for the future and the specificity students attach to that preparation is apparent from the first question asked in the interviews. Becker et al. (1968) observed three perspectives--academic, organizational, and relationships--in use among students in the late 1950's. While all three remain in use today, the GPA perspective has become the dominant one, as it best enables students to navigate the college years in their pursuit of vocational preparation.

While there were many other impressions, these four are the major ones that came from the research.

Results

Twenty five freshmen were not interviewed, only 13 were interviewed. Redundancy was achieved so quickly that a better use of time was to broaden the scope of the inquiry by talking with older students both in age and classification and by going to another institution. None of the thirteen students were interviewed four times, and only four were interviewed three times. There just was not much change in the students' perspective during the year. If anything, they seemed to be more committed to their initial views concerning grades and the value of college. An example is Harry, a 19 year old freshman who finished his freshman year with a 3.2 GPA, 3.0 for the fall and 3.4 for the spring.

In his initial interview in September, his number one goal was to "get above a 3.0 GPA." Harry went on to say, "we (the institution) make grades important, yet they do not reflect actual knowledge or capability." During our December interview, he stated that he wished he could be concerned with learning rather than grades, but he knew better. In May, Harry responded to a question concerning the importance of grades to other aspects of college by saying, "grades are more important than other aspects--only way available to judge me." Finally, in May Harry said a 3.0 is acceptable. He had achieved his number one goal, to get above a 3.0, but it is now only acceptable. Toward the end of our May conversation, it became evident that Harry now saw success in college as a 3.5 or higher GPA.

Another example of the GPA perspective existing prior to college and slowly becoming an important perspective around which decisions in college are made involves Mark, a sophomore. My first encounter with Mark was in August when I sat in an academic suspension appeal hearing. Mark was appealing his suspension by appearing in front of the appeals committee. His defense was simple, he knew his grades were important, but he had lacked the discipline to ensure he would succeed. He felt he now had the discipline necessary to succeed and would seek advice concerning course selection because he now knew the major (business) he wanted to pursue. Mark became my advisee for the 1987-1988 academic year. During the year Mark's grades did improve such that at the end of spring semester he had slightly above a 2.0 GPA and was again in good standing. In the spring semester, he had identified the college he was going to transfer to in the spring of 1989. (Remember the primary research occurred at a two year college from which everyone must

transfer in order to complete a bachelor's degree.) It required a 2.5 GPA both for transfer and to gain admission to the school of business within the institution. As a freshman who knew all along the importance of grades, Mark had placed the GPA perspective in a position which influences his lines of action. For the fall 1988 semester Mark must raise his GPA five tenths of a point in order to have a 2.5 for transfer and admission. He selected his own courses for the fall, and it was a meticulous application of the GPA perspective. Only those courses were selected that Mark had clearly identified as requirements and/or likely to yield a high final grade.

After Mark had identified where he wanted to transfer, he visited the campus during the spring semester. The visit sparked a refinement in the GPA perspective that was also at work with Harry and would seem to be an expected occurrence for new freshmen without sophisticated GPA perspectives. After his visit, Mark was very disappointed to realize that his frame of reference for acceptable grades, 2.5 GPA by the end of the fall 1988 semester, was not sufficient to be competitive where he wanted to transfer. Possessing a 2.5 GPA would gain him admission, but from his interactions with students during his visit it became obvious to Mark that minimally a 3.0 GPA was needed. Mark's comment, after realizing that this new minimum GPA was the actual acceptable level, was in essence that it was very frustrating to continue to be penalized for not fully realizing the need to hold the GPA perspective as the central perspective while in college. For Mark it is the GPA that is critical, and any set of courses that will get him to that 3.0 GPA is acceptable.

Grades are continually used by institutions of higher education as a commodity capable of identifying something valuable. Not only does a

student encounter the importance grades hold when he/she attends a college, but colleges also provide advance notice concerning the value of grades. An all too typical example occurred in the July 27, 1988, Herald Times Reporter, Manitowoc, Wisconsin. A local high school was recognized by a state university for its ability to produce good students. The state university went on to announce that the average grade point average for students from this high school attending their institution was over a 3.0. There was no mention of any other aspect of these students' experiences or accomplishments at college. Students arrive at college today with the GPA perspective in place. In Mark's case he did not realize the importance it needed to play; in Harry's case it became more important with success. The GPA perspective may exist and be carried out in student interactions while in college, but its development is well underway before college. The summaries to the various questions posed to these students follow. In the initial interviews with the thirteen freshmen, it is evident that they arrive at college holding a clear idea what role grades play in college.

Responses to General Questions

While each interview was unique, an attempt was made to ask students a set of similar questions initially. These questions were derived from the questions in Chapter Four. In addition, the questions posed in Chapter Four were used as themes around which responses to other questions and topics of conversation with the students are grouped.

The Value of College

What does it mean to attend college? At the initial interview all thirteen freshmen were simply asked, "Why college," as the first question.

- an avenue to a career
- make more money
- access to a better job and get off the farm
- it is the thing to do--gets you a better job
- to have a good career
- better chance to get a better job
- cannot get anywhere without college
- prep for the future (four of the thirteen students used nearly this expression)
- not sure (this student went on to say that he was unsure if it prepared you for a career)

Every student responded to that initial question from the long-range perspective of "what will college provide me after I graduate?" Even the student who said he was not sure was looking at college from the long-range perspective. He was a music major who appeared to be skilled already in that area and who was highly focused toward a life in music. It would seem that the impact of college lacks an immediacy to students initially, its impact lies in some future time. While most students can verbalize what many adults who are college educated at least fondly remember as the immediate impact of college, these initial thirteen students and the others who were interviewed point out a contradiction. At least these thirteen students were clear on the end

they sought in college. The means to that end, attending college, held no more meaning than a continuation of taking courses, something they had been doing for twelve years prior. Several students were asked, if they could simply move into the career of their choice now would they be willing to skip college. The unequivocal answer was, yes, I would skip college. College is that final endurance test before entering the adult world. What is the immediate impact of college? I led a discussion concerning the value of college which involved approximately ten faculty and 25 students. A student gave the best definition I heard during the entire time of this research. "College should enable you to detect bullshit." Yet students, who also thought this was a concise and accurate definition of the impact of college, could not make the connection between college, in particular the curriculum, and developing the ability to detect bullshit. Thus, college loses its potential for immediacy and college becomes that last endurance test before adulthood for our young. The above may be the essence of this investigation. While the sample size is small, the consistency of the students' views concerning college is overwhelming.

This question was asked again in December, and little change occurred. The young man who was not sure as to why he was at college responded in December that college was preparation for the future, a demonstration of maturity. Another student, a 3.912 freshman year GPA, said that besides career preparation she would now add learning to handle life and make decisions to her response to why college.

One area noticeable by its almost total lack of mention was learning. None of the thirteen initially mentioned learning when talking about why college was for them, and only a few mentioned it in

subsequent interviews. As the inquiry expanded to older students and students at another institution, learning remained noticeably absent from the conversations. When learning was mentioned, it was not usually in relationship to content associated with a course. One student, 2.876 freshman year, described learning as exposure to others and their ideas. The long-range perspective seemed to provide a dominant context which allowed college to be defined in a very narrow manner. In fact two of the original thirteen freshmen who were interviewed stated, college should prepare you for a specific job. Could the opportunity and immediacy of college for students be summed up by the student who said earlier, "it is the thing to do?"

Except for the music majors who were interviewed, even the major/intermediate perspective did not appear to provide any context to assist students in answering why college. While each student had at least a general idea of what they might want the future to be, i.e., high income, no physical labor and a job they enjoyed, the idea of an academic major did not provide much definition to the situation they found themselves in as students. They did not mention their lack of knowledge of the relationship between a major and the future life/career they anticipated, but it was apparent as the conversations occurred that students did not possess the information or have an understanding as to how a major might affect the future. The only sense of the value a major might possess in determining lines of action was that to be an accountant meant one must be an accounting major. If the observation is correct that the dominant perspective is the long-range view that college is simply vocational preparation for the future, then the lack of any type of intermediate perspective seems logical. At least

initially students seem focused on college as preparation for a future that is unclear but promising, and the perspective from which students feel best able to realize that future while in college is the GPA perspective.

Grades

The GPA perspective is seen most clearly when students talk about acceptable grades and what grades really indicate to them. Every student who was interviewed, whether a new freshman or older, whether above a 3.0 GPA or below it, in reality any description could be used, said that a 3.0 GPA was the minimal acceptable grade point average. To students, "good" grades exist somewhere above the threshold of 3.0. A relationship was seen between high school grades and what was expected in college. Those students who graduated from high school near the top of their class would use 3.0 to 3.5 as the acceptable range, but when pushed a little they would admit that they expected a much higher average and that a 4.0 GPA was seen as a distinct possibility.

Students who graduated from high school in the 2.5 to 3.5 GPA range, which was the vast majority of students interviewed for this study, saw a 3.0 as both acceptable and achievable if they worked at it. The few students who were interviewed who graduated from high school with a GPA below 2.5 still identified a 3.0 as the acceptable level, but they were not sure it was attainable. Still, they all could clearly identify the acceptable threshold for a college GPA. Some would be willing to bet that they could readily achieve a 3.0 GPA, while others hoped that college was the place where they might become a 3.0 student.

What proved interesting was the follow-up question to the acceptable GPA question. What did those GPA's and the grades that embody the GPA tell students about themselves, their peers, the institution and outsiders.

- grades tell you about study habits
- grades are not related to ability
- grades tell me I have not worked hard enough
- grades tell you how much you try
- grades tell you both how intelligent and how hard you work and also how responsible you are
- grades tell you how much time and effort a person puts in
- grades tell you about your motivation and do not tell you about intelligence
- not sure what they measure--surely not intelligence, maybe not even effort
- grades are dependent on ability, effort is of secondary importance. No matter my effort level, compared to certain others they consistently receive better grades. It must be some type of ability.
- grades indicate effort not intelligence
- grades do not indicate how intelligent you are or how hard you work. Maybe grades indicate your ability to see through the system.

In relation to poor grades, students generally attribute poor performance in college to choice, lack of effort, and/or lack of direction. At the private liberal arts college, a group of students discussed failure and immaturity. One of the students described an

immature person as "one who has the ability, but chooses not to use it and fails." Harry, the student cited earlier described bad grades as "a sign of immaturity--unable to balance one's life." Joe, a 2.0 sophomore just off academic probation, spoke of lack of direction. "Performance and effort have to do with the value the class has in your future. I know where I am going now so calculus the second time is okay." Becker et al. (1968) described an element of the GPA perspective as a demonstration by students of their ability to manage several elements in their lives appropriately. To students, failure or bad grades have little to do with academic ability, and students do not see a lack of intellectual ability in themselves or their peers as a problem. This observation makes sense from a Symbolic Interactionist perspective. During the inquiry, I did not hear students personally discuss among themselves the topic of intellectual ability, without interactions related to this topic, it could not become part of any vocabulary students use. Thus, failure or bad grades are not connected to intellectual ability by the simple lack of students using any reference to intellectual ability when discussing grades. In addition, in the interviews no freshman ever mentioned lack of intellectual ability as a factor in academic failure. Only when sophomores were interviewed did intellectual ability become a topic. Two sophomore males, both slightly above a 2.0 GPA, expressed their concern about carefully selecting a major. They both wanted a degree, but they were aware now that their limited ability would exclude many options, and they needed a relatively easy major in order to graduate. Since discussion of limited ability is taboo, it takes a while to accumulate enough interactions in courses for

students to see a self where ability is an element in determining lines of action.

Yet, indirectly ability is often discussed by students. It takes the form of students sharing their grades among themselves or discussing someone's grades who is not present. The discussion appeared to stop at grades. Students do not readily associate grades with intellectual ability. While on a trip, I listened to three sophomores discuss the grades and ability of another student. Her good grades were attributed to her ability to listen better, know what to study, and assess what the instructor thought important. In particular, one of the three mentioned this student's ability to skim a chapter of a textbook and select the points worth knowing. At the end of this description, the other two commented that that was something special. Ability was seen as efficiency is achieving good grades.

Other students acknowledged that grades were topics of discussion. A sophomore said, "they take the place of 'How's the weather?' It's something we all have in common." Another student cited an important use in sharing grades: "You compare yourself to others who took a particular course you are considering taking." Two females, one at the two year institution and one at the private liberal arts college, admitted to using grades to decide who to date or associate with. One of them said, "You know who is going to make it." Several students said that it was difficult for an instructor to evaluate a student in a narrative manner regarding what a student learned in a course. It would also appear difficult for students to share with each other a subjective

assessment of what they achieved in a course. It is easier and probably more definitive to be able to speak of a grade.

Another factor in relying on grades, and a very specific and narrow definition of ability within interactions, is a belief that learning is not an essential part of a course. When students were asked the question, "could learning get in the way of a grade," the response was yes. The areas often used as examples were science and mathematics. Students recounted the effort exerted in memorizing formulas and specific details such as the chemical elements and not understanding or remembering it for very long after the test. An insightful comment in this area came from a freshman woman with a 3.912 GPA. She received all A's except for one B her first year. Her answer, when asked the above question, was yes, but she added she probably learned most in the course in which she got the lowest grade. Even when learning is an essential part of the course, the grade does not necessarily reflect the amount of learning that occurred.

Grades appear to do for students what Meyrowitz (1985) saw as a need, i.e., grades provide a single definition of a situation. Students use the singular idea of a grade to assess effort, maturity, ability and responsibility both for themselves and their peers. Not one person ever mentioned doing away with grades as a viable option. Grades are clear, concise and easy to use. Even though a grade may be used to determine different aspects of their self, what always remains the same is the understanding that the higher the grade the more mature you are, the more effort you have exerted, and the greater ability you possess. A sophomore student, who had avoided mathematics for three semesters, told of finally taking the one mathematics course she needed. She knew she

was weak in mathematics, but in the mid-term she received an A, mostly by luck according to her assessment. Yet, she told of students, who she did not know, soon after the results were known (grades are shared quickly) coming to her seeking help. Her comment was, "I told them I did not really know the stuff, but that did not make any difference I knew how to get through the test and that was important." Just as students use grades, they also notice the institution's need and use of grades.

Not many students responded to questions concerning grades and the institution. Either it was so apparent and ingrained that grades were part of the fabric of an institution, or it was difficult to pose a question that could spark a conversation about grades and the institution. For those who did respond, grades were clearly an indicator of institutional value.

- you have nothing to replace them with
- only way you keep track of courses
- only way to judge me
- do not believe faculty can evaluate how much we learn so a grade is the best available substitute.

The last student comment is of particular interest. You cannot see learning occurring, and you must depend upon the student telling you that they learned. What you can see are behaviors such as taking a test or writing a paper that may or may not indicate learning. The very people who are being evaluated must be able to tell the instructor that learning is occurring or that they already knew it before his/her instruction in order that the instructor may assign a grade to them.

What if the student is unable or unwilling to communicate effectively what they learned? Are grades the best available substitute?

Several student conversations touched upon the effort they put into "trying to read the instructor." Two students provided examples of figuring out the "system." A freshman music major spoke of having calculated the value of a series of 15 minute sessions that were part of a voice course. He found each 15 minute session was worth $1/90$ of his total grade. His comment then was that the instructor did not think the sessions were very important. The last step was for him to calculate how many sessions he could skip and still achieve the desired grade, an A.

The second instance is an excellent example of Max Weber's idea of rule elaboration and minimum effort. A sophomore medical technology major spoke of taking a two-semester course sequence in economics and the realization that came to her while in the midst of second semester course. During the first semester the student had disliked the course and was not looking forward to the second semester of it. Her comment was, "It had enough structure: I could figure out how to miss class and still do okay." As we talked, it became apparent that was her typical way of approaching a course. The second semester was taught by a different instructor. The description of the course and what occurred to her should be of great importance to faculty. At first she was very frustrated with the second semester course. This instructor was different, he did not give much structure to the course and had a large subjective evaluation component called participation. When pressed to give more structure and explain what he expected, particularly regarding participation, he would respond by telling them not to worry, just do

the best they can. She began to worry about what was an acceptable effort in the course. "I realized I needed to be prepared and to speak in class."

Her initial method for dealing with participation was to speak once a class, which she thought should be sufficient. After the first few times she spoke, she said, "I thought this isn't too bad, he (the instructor) always seemed to be interested in what I said." She did not miss class, in fact her comment was that she did not want to miss class. Further, she spoke of putting in the effort to do well, enjoying the course and learning a lot. This second semester economics instructor was identified by her as the best she ever had. It did not occur to this researcher that this was an example of Weber's idea until the student ended the description with the analysis that too much structure in a course just lets the student figure out how little they can do, and too many faculty follow this route. Later I heard this instructor describe his approach to discussing grades and effort with students. He recounted a student coming to him about receiving a C on the mid-term examination. The student was disappointed in his performance and wanted to do better. The instructor said, "I asked him how much time had he spent preparing for the test. The student said about two hours, and I told him he should feel real good because a C was a great grade for two hours of preparation."

The importance the institution places on grades is seen clearly by students, particularly as they move from sophomore to junior standing. The Colleges of Business, Education and Engineering within medium to large universities have established grade point requirements much higher than the traditional good standing grade point average of 2.0 as

necessary for admission to majors in these colleges as a junior. At one Big Ten University students wishing to major in business or engineering are not allowed to declare either until they reach junior standing and then only if their grade point averages are 3.0 or higher. While students who began as freshman at these "four-year" institutions face the challenge of making the grade, students at two-year institutions feel the pressure even more keenly. At the two-year institution where the interviews took place the majority of the students wish to transfer to institutions which have established a 2.5 GPA as necessary to transfer even as an undecided or liberal arts major. The vast majority of students that were interviewed though wanted to major in business or education which most often required higher grade point averages than 2.5. To students the idea that grades are it is simply reinforced by these institutional expectations for specific grade point averages much higher than a 2.0.

While relatively high grade-point requirements have been in existence for graduate and professional schools for a long time, the need for a GPA substantially above the traditional good standing mark of 2.0 at the junior and senior level of undergraduate education is a recent phenomenon. Becker et al. (1968) indicated the GPA perspective as primarily being built and sustained within student interactions while in college. Could changes such as those just cited be working to create a situation that is defined by students very differently than in the late fifties when Becker's original research was conducted?

Not only does the GPA perspective develop within student interactions, it also is developed as students interact with those who represent the institution. Grades, if not the only, are the most

important record kept of a student's endeavor while in college. Faculty who use highly structured syllabi and allocate specific percentages of the grade to certain tasks give the impression that grades do measure something and thus are valuable. How could a student have any other response than grades are it?

A last group who students see as critical in giving grades their meaning and maybe the most important group within the GPA perspective are the outsiders. Outsiders are primarily those who will be their first employers, but they also include all who are significant others in the student's life, outside of college currently. In particular with the outsiders, grades are seen by students--as one sophomore said--as "short term necessities." The word outsider was chosen because several students used that term.

- grades are important because others outside attribute significance to them
- grades are not the most important thing personally . . . however, an employer will not be aware of the other things. They use grades.
- grades are important particularly for outsiders. Look at insurance rates. Good students must be good drivers.
- outside forces make grades important
- grades enable you to get to other places

If the dominant perspective is vocational preparation then what outsiders hold as important will also be regarded as important by students. Walk into a college placement office and look at the firms which the students consider prestigious. Not untypical is the criteria that IBM uses to initially screen new graduates from college, a student must have

a 3.0 or higher to even sign-up for an interview. Another example is in the education field where grades are a primary determinate of initial entry into the profession. Beginning in the fall of 1990, a student must have a 2.5 overall and 2.75 GPA in his/her major and professional education courses in order to receive certification to teach in the state of Wisconsin.

A perspective that 30 years ago was built and sustained almost exclusively within student interactions is now built much more out of institutional and outsider interactions with students. Students take these new interactions and simply incorporate them into their behaviors and interactions with other students to map out lines of action. It does not appear that the original GPA perspective has changed at all. Instead, these newer forces only reinforce its utility for the student seeking his/her way through college. Grades through the GPA perspective continue to supply the immediate perspective needed in college. Students know only too well that it is the utility and immediacy of the GPA perspectives in college that is of value to their long-range perspective, career preparation.

Getting the Grades

Grades are the central idea of college for students. Good grades mean a number of different things, all positive. If grades are it, then what do students do to ensure they succeed?

What students do can best be summed by a freshman with a 3.613, who said, "I do the work" and "I do it alone." When asked, "who gets good grades?" the immediate response is, those who work hard and put in the time. Even those who receive unacceptable grades pinpoint one of two

things as the reason for poor grades: they did not work hard enough, or did not use their time well. The one common sin that is okay to confess to by anyone at anytime is, I did not study enough.

When the conversation moved to studying, every student described the same general conditions of studying alone, usually in isolation from others. Group studying was rarely mentioned and when it was, group studying was done in areas where the outcome was relatively unimportant to the course grade, such as working together to write up a chemistry laboratory. The other areas where group activities in academic pursuits occurred were quiz sessions just before an examination or cheating on a project. At the two-year institution, several times I sat near a group of students who were peppering each other with questions in preparation for an examination that day. Also two students in a computer course described how they would work together on a programming assignment, each doing a part of the program and then assembling it.

Student responses to why they studied alone focused on efficiency. Comments such as "you tend to visit too much" or "some do all the work" were common. Even the above example of cheating was not as much team work as it was an example of efficient use of time. Most likely they worked on their segment of the program alone. A professor of English at one of the institutions made a statement concerning students doing their studying alone: "Maybe this is the last time they will be judged individually."

Students know the importance the instructor plays in giving the grade. Two ways students have of attempting to deal with the instructor are trying to select the right instructor when a choice is available or once in the course trying to "read" the instructor. Harry, whom we have

heard from earlier, said it directly, "Sure I judge an instructor by how hard he is." He went on to discuss the fact that students talk about the difficulty of instructors. Joe, the student just off probation, was equally direct: "Sure you take the easy classes." Some of my longest conversations occurred with Joe and Harry, and as the year went by any hesitancy to say what they thought seemed minimal. The more typical response, which one could call the party-line, was exemplified by two students. The freshman music major with a 3.613 GPA said he would not select an instructor only on how easy he was. "I feel better about myself when I have to work and am not bored." Another freshman had a similar response. She did not always judge faculty on whether or not they were easy. For her, fairness and whether they were interesting was more important.

However, two students whom I was with one day provide solid support for Harry and Joe's comments. We were discussing courses, and Susan, a freshman, was considering English Literature for next semester. Some time elapsed before I could record the short conversation that occurred, but the key words were remembered.

Susan You took English 100 last semester.

Kerry (a sophomore) Yes, but I had Jones.

Susan So?

Kerry You know.

Me What that he is a good teacher (among students and faculty, Jones is often spoken of as an excellent instructor).

Kerry No, he really is easy, no writing.

English 100 was being taught by someone different next semester. I recounted this story to one of Jones' colleagues, who was also in the English Department. The colleague's response was, "Yes, I know that he does not require much writing." Yet, I have heard this person in other situations speak with some good natured envy of Jones' superior teaching ability. Harry and Joe both had taken courses from Jones. There were only three members in the English Department at this institution. I was able to look at the literature enrollment records for several past years. Every semester Jones' literature courses are full, while the other two regularly have courses only half full. An English professor who requires little writing in a course appears to have a substantial following.

Oddly, I also checked Jones' grade distribution compared to the other two. They are essentially the same. Lastly, I saw Susan later and asked what she decided. She took English 100 since she needed a literature course and it was the only one that fit her schedule.

Another example that demonstrates the importance of getting the right instructor in order to get the right grade was the mathematics department at the two-year institution. There were four mathematics faculty, one of whom had full enrollments in the lower level courses no matter the time of day. A review of this person's grade distributions showed a regular pattern of giving over one-half A's and B's. In fact, in two of the courses which this person taught in the spring 1988 semester, over half the grades were A's. This person's distributions were very different from the other three mathematics department members. Whether she is an outstanding teacher who brings out the best or simply is an easy grader is not critical. Harry's comment about students

discussing instructors was played out concerning this one mathematics instructor. As an academic advisor, I regularly encounter new students who have never taken a college course, yet they specifically ask for this person. For the spring 1988 semester, the only course to close the first day, in fact the only course to close the first week of spring registration, was the only lower level mathematics course this person was teaching. It happened to be offered at 8:00 a.m. on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, which is not usually prime academic time for students.

When one cannot get the needed grade in a particular course, a student's last option is to drop the course. For many of the popular, attractive majors that offer a potential for higher salary, institutions have established a GPA higher than 2.0 for junior standing. This makes a C not very desirable. Several students spoke of dropping a course due to the possibility of receiving a C. However, one student clearly demonstrated the power of the GPA perspective when he told of dropping a course in which he realized he would likely get a C, but he continued to attend after dropping because he enjoyed the course, particularly the discussions in class. This seemed to be a reasonable line of action to him. Learning and the grade were clearly separate elements of a course. If learning and the grade are separate, then does only a grade separate success from failure in college? The last section of this chapter briefly considers two students, both former engineering majors.

Grades and the Meaning of College

Joe, the 2.0 student mentioned earlier, and I spoke a number of times concerning the meaning of college. Joe was typical of the large

group who come to college for job training. Learning in the sense of developing job skills was valuable, but learning as an intellectual pursuit held no place in Joe's definition of college. His comments earlier about calculus the second time and taking easy courses would support the above view. In September of 1987 when we first met, Joe had come to the conclusion that he did not have the skills in mathematics and the physical sciences needed to be an engineer. But not to attend college would not allow him to make the type of money he wanted. He was at a point of frustration which it seemed he could not understand. Grades to him indicated effort, not skill or ability. Yet he spoke of a desire to be an engineer, and when asked if he did not try, he spoke of putting forth the needed effort. Either he did not recognize his effort as insufficient or did not see the contradiction in his conception of what grades demonstrate and the reality of his effort not providing the needed grade. During our first discussion he vented his frustration by saying, "For my effort and time, I deserve a degree." He had earned 46 credits at that point and was not dealing very well with the idea of not being an engineer.

During the next few months, Joe searched for and discussed his anxiety concerning a major. His search was focused on a major which his GPA would allow him to select and would provide a clear career path. Never once did he discuss or investigate any majors in the liberal arts area. Even though many of the traditional liberal arts still use the traditional 2.0 GPA standard, Joe did not see them as viable. His search stopped when he identified a major titled "Building Construction Management" at a regional state university. Only one semester of calculus was needed, and a 2.0 was sufficient for admission. What

appeared to sell him on this major was the detailed placement report this major provided and the list of courses which he would take such as "General Cost Estimating" and "Commercial Building Planning." The dominant perspective of college as vocational preparation indeed guided Joe through what he saw as the necessity of the college experience. The GPA perspective is the navigational perspective that allowed Joe to ply the waters of college effectively. In spite of the contradiction Joe lives with concerning grades, effort and intelligence, he saw college as an objective experience. In particular, courses provided future job skills that were tangible and a direct result of what was learned in a course such as "General Cost Estimating." To Joe college was most valuable when its focus was very narrow. He wanted only those skills taught that prepared him for a job and he wanted the institution to attest to his skill level. Grades fit nicely into that view. For Joe grades attest to his skills without saying too much. Indeed as Milton and Edgerly (1976) noted, grades are a unidimensional symbol reporting a multidimensional phenomenon, and most students are comfortable with that representation of themselves.

Joe was also typical in another way which is worthy of note. In my conversations with faculty, they readily acknowledged the existence of the GPA perspective. Their perspective was that it was a sad manner in which to approach courses, and it was the easier way when compared to some type of a learning perspective. The faculty perspective had no meaning in Joe's life. Life for Joe centered around work and learning and it happens that both terms were defined differently when compared to the faculty's view. Joe worked hard at college using the GPA perspective, which in Joe's case meant enduring an English literature course

needed for graduation, just as the janitor who hates cleaning the toilet endures that task to keep his/her job. In addition, Joe worked 25 hours per week at a local discount store, where he was in charge of the sports equipment and toy area. In November and December he worked close to fulltime. For Joe the easier way in approaching college is not the lazy way, it is the more efficient and smarter way to organize a busy life.

During the summer orientation program at the two-year commuter institution, one of the session leaders always asked how many of the students intended to work while attending college. Consistently, 70-80% raised their hands. This person then asked how many were planning on working more than 20 hours per week and only a few hands went down. It appears students at a two-year commuter institution must work hard in order to attend. My observation of Joe at his place of employment was that he was a responsible employee who took his work seriously and put some effort into his job and his typical of the students interviewed.

The other former engineering major was Bill, a 2.824 sophomore. He had made the grade, including a B in trigonometry. During the spring semester he attempted calculus, but he withdrew later in the semester. His comment was, "I just do not understand it." We talked again in the late summer, and he had decided to attend an area vocational school. What is of interest is what Bill observed in a fellow student whom he worked with during the summer. Bill said he had worked with a guy who was approximately a year and a half from his engineering degree and had failed all three required calculus courses at least once. He was retaking Calculus III this fall for the third time. Bill spoke of how determined this young man was in his pursuit of that engineering degree. Bill obviously thought this guy did not really know calculus well based

on the number of times he retook calculus courses. Bill's comment was, "Don't you need to know calculus to be an engineer?" The GPA perspective would say, "No, you do not need to know calculus; you need the grade in calculus." Bill did not use the GPA perspective, at least not with calculus. He assumed he needed to be able to understand calculus. Consequently, when he failed to understand calculus, he failed to use the GPA perspective to ply the waters of calculus and changed his dominant perspective in the sense of moving from engineering to a vocational degree. Yet, the dominant perspective in another sense remained unchanged. Whatever you do after high school in postsecondary education, it is aimed at vocational preparation.

In Habits of the Heart it was observed that people live lives of contradictions not so much due to shallow choices or wanting to deceive themselves or others but more from the simple need to keep on living. To subject one's self to the critical eye of consistency in words and deeds is not part of human existence, at least not on a regular basis. Students appear no different from the rest of us.

Those who see that effort plus some type of ability have something to do with making the grade may have an accurate picture of what it takes to succeed. But yet, Bill's depiction of the guy seeking the engineering degree and his approach to calculus moderates the idea of effort plus ability and focuses instead on a very pragmatic view of just getting it done. The GPA perspective best provides for this pragmatic view of college. To students, college is preparation for the future, but not in the sense of pursuing learning or intellectual development, for that is a myth. As one student said, "College is prep for the future, a demonstration of maturity." This is the student view, and

grades work well as a demonstration of maturity. Insurance companies keep track of statistics that prove what a sophomore observed: "Good students must be good drivers."

Students today believe in the quote that began this chapter. "If you don't have a good education, you're going to be a nobody." They may vary in their definition of a good education, but one area of consistency will be that the higher the grade point average, the better the education.

CHAPTER VI

COMMENTS AND DISCUSSION

Students are interested less in the discovery of self and more in the presentation of an acceptable self.

(Unknown Author)

The GPA perspective more than ever is a functional part of students' lives today. College has always been vocational preparation for the future. One hundred years ago, it may have been a preparation for a different set of vocations, but it was vocational preparation. However, at approximately that time, the 1880's, the second echelon areas were beginning to gain strength, business, engineering and education (Brubacher & Rudy, 1976). While the GPA perspective may have been an important internal perspective, internal in that it had little impact or value outside the college experience of students, the fact of attending and graduating was what most often changed an individual's life. As the second echelon areas have come to dominant higher education, having the right major with the appropriately high grade point average has become a critical component in the vocational preparation perspective students continue to have toward college. Grades today are more important to those people who are employed in higher education, important to outsiders, and remain a way for students to judge themselves and their peers. The dominance of the second

echelon areas in higher education became a hard reality when in the 1980's they have been able to require GPA's much higher than the traditional liberal arts require in order to declare one of their areas as a major and subsequently graduate in education, business or engineering. The second echelon areas are where the majors are that students select today. This reality has made the GPA perspective a more important factor in determining lines of action for students today.

When Becker carried out his research in the late 1950's for Making the Grade, just receiving a degree was an important enough event; grades were not a critical accompanying component. Between 1960 and 1980, grades assumed a role of equal importance to possession of a degree, such that "grades are it" is an accurate perception made by the sophomore woman earlier.

One begins to realize the power grades hold and the usefulness which the GPA perspective has for students, when comments by faculty and students can be summed up in the response of one student. A bright freshman at a private liberal arts college was asked, what do grades tell you. She responded, "Not much."

Can the strength of a perspective be measured by the fact that most, if not all, parties complain about its validity, but nobody seriously proposes to change it, much less do away with it? In fact the GPA perspective's usefulness and sway with students has been increased by adding refinements such as now recording a + and - with the letter grade or being able to repeat a course and remove the first grade from the GPA. The correct GPA facilitates the presentation of an acceptable self, which is the bottom line for

students. Dan Saks, an economist, spoke of college, "as the personal search for one's level of incompetence or alternatively how does one discover he is a lemon" (Cited in Fischer, 1987). What a thoroughly frightening search this must be for students. Rather than deal with the possibility of finding out one is a lemon, would it not be safer and wiser to put one's effort into presenting that acceptable image? This is especially true if the consequences to effective image management is a career and future you desire. A question worth asking is, does image management produce a shallow self?

Another factor in the usefulness of the GPA perspective is a change in students' definition of college. Tinto (1987) spoke of a change which leads students to college. Tinto saw students more often attending college out of fear that should they not attend, some huge financial penalty will be assessed them. He went on to say this is a different situation from 20 or 30 years ago when students came to college with a belief that college could only help them succeed that much more. What the new situation fosters is passive behavior by students toward college. Grades are given by the faculty, and to earn those grades one need only respond to what the faculty require. Most importantly, by responding only to requirements, you do not need to invest your time and energy in considering the content of a course.

Again the GPA perspective can be seen in this view, which is an efficient and effective manner in which to take a course and seek its only recorded outcome, a grade. Further, Tinto's observation lent support to the existence of the vocational

preparation perspective, which dominates today's student. Stephan Gonzalez's father knew it when he said, "If you don't have a good education, you're going to be a nobody." Ted and Michelle, parents of a freshman, also knew it when they talked of the possibility of their son not returning to college for his sophomore year. He had a 2.9 GPA, but needed a 3.25 by the end of his sophomore year in order to gain admittance to his major as a junior. The most difficult courses were ahead and he was not optimistic that he would make the grade. Yet, his parents spoke of the concern that once he left college he would not return, and when he is older he will truly regret his decision. In the three times I spoke with them concerning their son, the context was never one of college as the intellectual endeavor: it was clear this was preparation for the future. Never did they mention discussing alternative majors with their son. It was to be a business major for which their son went to college and even in a moment of crisis it did not change. Their son's grade-point average was a clear and concise definition of the situation. How to deal with the situation was more difficult.

If Saks and Tinto have accurate views of today's students, then passive behavior and dependence on the GPA perspective to determine lines of action while in college makes a great deal of sense to students. Why become an active learner, as Tinto (1987) or Alexander Astin (1984) propose, when an outcome may be only to find out one is a lemon? Not making the grade appears much easier when it can be attributed to disinterest, lack of effort, or mismanagement of time. The students who were interviewed who were not

making the grade were quick to point out one of the above three reasons for doing poorly.

The GPA perspective is equally valuable for those not making the grade as it is in providing a perspective for those who succeed. It does not force one to compare him/herself with others. Those in higher education who believe that the college experience is an exploration of the self and a discovery of insights into the human situation fail to see the rather simple journey students are on, to find a comfortable existence in the future and a not too distant future at that. The GPA perspective is the immediate perspective which allows students to maintain their long-range perspective, even if a student must drop out of college.

What Becker et al. (1968) described as the GPA perspective is essentially what was found again in 1988. Students arrive at college with the basic elements of the GPA perspective in place and know its importance in determining immediate lines of actions in college, but students also understand the importance the grade-point average plays in determining lines of action in their long-range perspective. The only difference, if it can be called a difference, between students in 1958 and 1988 would be that today's students are more emphatic in stating the utility of the GPA perspective. In particular, the faculty and staff of institutions contribute to the increasing dominance of the GPA perspective.

I looked at several local newspapers in small towns which did not have significant higher education institutions in them. Besides publishing the junior and senior high school honor rolls, I regularly found news releases from the higher education

institutions which the local students were attending. It was always the same message, Dick or Jane were being cited for their outstanding academic performance as measured by grades. The refinements to grading and the increasing GPA requirements in the second echelon areas implemented by the faculty and staff only serve to further push students toward reliance on the GPA perspective. In addition, parents and the outsiders use grades to interpret the students' college experience. In an ironic twist today many states are involved with programs designed to assess the achievement of college students. Are not grades suppose to do this?

The power of the GPA perspective tells us that indeed the irony is not lost to students. Grades really do not appear to them to be connected to learning, academic achievement or intellectual ability. The GPA perspective allows students a way to heed the significance of grades and provides a practical view which allows students to choose lines of action that are effective and efficient. Further, it provides a way for them to judge themselves and their peers in the appropriate light of being a responsible and mature adult, one who can manage life's complexities, without needing to look too deeply at one's self. Milton and Edgerly (1976) spoke of grades as, unidimensional symbols reporting a multidimensional phenomenon of learning. It seems reasonable to assert that grades actually cannot do the above. Thus, if grades are ineffective in telling us about learning, then what do they tell us? That students can effectively navigate the waters of life. The GPA perspective is a person's beacon during college, and

as the beacon of light goes in a straightline to its target so too does the GPA perspective. A high grade-point average opens many doors. Whether it should or not is moot, it works, and what works is what is used.

Other Observations

There is a growing group of students at college today who live with an oddly configured set of views. The GPA perspective is particularly logical for those who see college as a more generic preparation for the future. Through the GPA perspective, they demonstrated their maturity and readiness for the world of work. But another group looks at college as preparation for a specific job. College to them is skill acquisition. Yet, they too readily use the GPA perspective. To them a grade reflects a skill level acquired. If I have a 3.5 gpa in accounting, I have the skills needed to become an accountant. The GPA perspective holds that if learning gets in the way of the grade, you then do not worry about learning, but is not learning integral to skill acquisition. A number of students I interviewed would be in this second group of having a skill-acquisition orientation. As I reflect back on our conversations neither I nor they saw this contradiction. It would be interesting, to understand how they integrate the GPA perspective with their desire to acquire skills.

While I talked with many faculty members, and they readily see the GPA perspective and may have used it in the past, I do not have a clear view of how they integrate their awareness of the GPA perspective with at least a discipline-directed commitment to a learning perspective. How do you foster learning when you know the importance grades play in a

student's life? What perspective do faculty utilize when they must use a symbol to represent learning? Are grades really as meaningless a gesture on the part of faculty as students believe grades are in measuring learning? Does there exist an unspoken truce between faculty and students concerning grades, in which neither side demands much from the other in the meanings attached to grades?

Faculty and students (undergraduates) live their college experiences together with little interaction. It can be suggested that the classroom is not the point of interaction, for there is no interaction in the classroom, but the point of interaction occurs where both parties have a significant stake in what happens, at determining the grade. We have an idea of what students do to get the grade and the place it holds in their lives. It would be useful to know what faculty do to give grades and what place grades hold in their lives.

Is the classroom an important place for serious discussions? Has it ever been an important place? My distinct impression is that students do not see the classroom as an important place. Students spoke of calculating how many times they could skip a class and still obtain the acceptable grade. Yet, one night in March I sat in the living room of a small dormitory at a private liberal arts college for a one-hour interview with five students concerning their view of grades. Three hours later at 12:30 a.m. what ended was a discussion that had touched upon personal relationships, politics (several had just heard Jesse Jackson speak) as well as grades. It ended with fifteen people in that living room plus many more who had stopped in to listen. One young man who sat behind me for most of the time and did not speak said at the end, "he just sat down because it sounded interesting." Do students want to be

involved in serious discussions? Becker et al. (1968) spoke of grades as the currency of college. When you are at the place where you earn your currency, you are at work. Any capable and mature adult knows you must pay attention to your work, and there is a time and place, as well as a limit on non-work discussion. For students, work is getting the grade. The classroom is a worksite.

Also that experience at the private college, which was residential, made apparent the situation for commuter students at a two-year institution. Students who live at home and attend the two-year institution do not have time for college. Their lives appear to be cluttered with relationships and work when compared to those who live on-campus. Those students who saw college as a place of skill acquisition attended the two-year institution.

A final observation concerns students' utilitarian view of college. Any discussions about major or career direction always had an implicit, if not explicit, context to it. Can this major get me job? What can I do with this major? These two questions were the yardsticks by which a major's value/utility was evaluated. The GPA perspective fits well with these questions, for it is an utilitarian perspective. But my sense is that the strength of students' utilitarian perspective is built on doubts about the utility of a college degree. Today's students know there is more to getting to that comfortable existence than possession of a degree. It must also be in the right major at the best institution (most prestigious) and with the highest possible grade point average. If they succeed, they will have effectively managed the presentation of a simple acceptable self to a potential employer.

Conclusion

"Grades are it." They are the end product of both the student's and institution's effort. For students the GPA perspective is a clear, concise, effective and efficient view of how to obtain the desired results. This perspective on how students view and experience college is cynical, instrumental and accurate. College today for students cannot be a place of intellectual growth and cognitive development. Students do not see the need nor feel the desire to engage themselves in interactions which will challenge their perspectives. To accept the challenge of examining perspectives will by its very act foster a changing definition of their self. Further, changing the definition of the situation, college as vocational preparation, through adoption of a perspective different than the GPA perspective would be dangerous to their future. Higher Education's use of grades, their accompanying structure and the meanings that outsiders attach to grades make it important for all students to present simple and similar images, which grades do so very well. It appears Higher Education's function is to produce individuals similar to those who have graduated in the past.

Several questions arise which should be of public concern. First, do we believe we are evolved or evolving? If we are evolved, meaning this is the best humans are going to be, then similarity should be our priority and education should contribute to that outcome. However, should we see ourselves as an evolving species morally, intellectually and physically, would not diversity as an outcome be beneficial to us? A related question is, are not structure and similarity connected? The GPA perspective and the mechanisms for giving and recording grades are highly structured ideas. These ideas serve to perpetuate themselves and

produce essentially a singular set of behaviors among college students. Unfortunately, students appear to count on the regularities of their behavior for a rather bland and intellectually nonengaging life in college.

Faculty and staff would do a great service for higher education, if they made college a rather subjective, unstructured and stressful experience for students. The nature of humans leans toward creating stability that comes from organization and structure. It would seem a better route for groups such as students to have to forge that stability out of somewhat unpredictable human interactions, rather than encountering a perspective like the GPA perspective, which is built on highly predictable interactions. My six year son's life, like his bedroom, is messy and chaotic, but he is actively engaged in learning. What is happening to him in first grade is similar to what happens to college students and it is sad. He has encountered the predictable. Success in the predictable situation that education is, depends on one's ability to play the game and the capability to accept the instrumental idea of education as more important than the cognitive aspects. The GPA perspective embodies the instrumental idea of higher education.

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APPENDIX

Dear

I am conducting a study of student views toward the academic side of college. Your assistance is needed. I have selected a small group of new freshmen at UWC-Manitowoc to interview in order to gain an understanding of how students at a two-year institution develop views of academic life at college. If you are willing, I would like to interview you. The interview will take approximately 30 to 45 minutes.

I am attempting to learn about three aspects of student life in college. One, how do students go about determining lines of action as they begin college? Specifically, what value do grades, courses and learning have to students. Two, do students at two-year institutions differ from students at four-year institution level. Three, have student views of grades, courses and learning changed in the past 25 years? The study was first done in 1962.

I hope you choose to be involved. You will find the questions interesting and thought provoking. If you do want to be involved in the interview, please come by the Student Service's Office and leave the form from the bottom of this letter. I will contact you to set up a time or you can schedule a time when you come in. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Michael A. Herrity
Director of Student Services

NAME _____

Times which are good for you to meet _____

VITA³

Michael A. Herrity

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Thesis: A STUDY OF THE GPA PERSPECTIVE AMONG STUDENTS AT A TWO-YEAR INSTITUTION

Major Field: Higher Education Administration

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Tarboro, North Carolina, October 6, 1950, the son of James B. and Margaret A. Herrity.

Education: Graduate from the University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, in December 1972, with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Physical Education; received a Master of Arts in Education in Counseling from the University of Northern Iowa in December 1976; completed requirements for the Doctor of Education Degree at Oklahoma State University in December 1988.

Professional Experience: Residence Hall Coordinator, University of Northern Iowa, August 1977 to June 1979; Coordinator of Residence Life, The University of Texas at Austin, August 1979 to May 1982; Coordinator of Residence Life, Oklahoma State University, June 1982 to June 1985; Academic Counselor, Oklahoma State University, June 1985 to July 1987; Director of Student Services, University of Wisconsin Center-Manitowoc County, July 1987 to present.