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## Introduction: It Should Not Be Left to Chance

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**educate**

The annual Barbara Biber lecture, given under the auspices of the Graduate School of Education at Bank Street College, honors the contributions of Barbara Biber (1903-1993) to both Bank Street and the wider educational community. Dr. Biber was a central figure shaping the institution that evolved from the Bureau of Educational Experiments to become Bank Street College of Education. A keen observer of children and classrooms who immersed herself in the phenomena of children's and teachers' lives, her writings achieved a depth of insight and conceptual elegance. As a researcher and scholar, she continuously reexamined and refined her thinking.

This lecture memorializes her progressive legacy.

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## INTRODUCTION

jonathan g. silin

*... wherever there has been conscience, there has always been evaluation, self-examination by the educator, in one form or another.*

Barbara Biber

**A**lmost 20 years ago I was asked to review a book of Barbara Biber's collected essays, *Early Education and Psychological Development*. A former Bank Street student already familiar with her work, I was intimidated by the task before me. Nonetheless, fresh from doctoral studies, I was determined to raise questions about the primacy Biber gave to developmental theory and the social thought of John Dewey. Soon after the review appeared, I heard from a mutual colleague that Biber very much appreciated my comments about the limits of the developmental perspective and the need for a more directly political analysis of schooling. I in turn was relieved, if not just a little surprised, by her response. In retrospect, I see that my surprise reflected a serious underestimation of Biber's thinking, for in recently rereading her book, I am reminded of the breadth and depth of her vision and the generosity of her spirit. After all, here was someone willing to look back over a half century of pioneering work with the single goal of assessing what had remained constant and what had changed, what had become dated and what was still fresh. For Biber, evaluation of program and of self was a matter of conscience, an ethical responsibility to assess whether the work we pursue with such zest and commitment is indeed worthwhile.

It is most appropriate that Ellen Lagemann was invited to present the annual Barbara Biber lecture at the opening of the 2000-2001 academic year. Like Biber, Lagemann is a passionate advocate of progressive education and of mindful evaluation. Biber wrote at a time when the influx of federal funding for Head Start and Follow Through created a more competitive marketplace in which early childhood programs experienced new pressures to prove their worth to parents and to legislators. She upheld the importance of formative and summative evaluation,

looking at process as well as outcomes. Now, along with Biber, Lagemann decries the use of standardized achievement tests as the sole markers of program success. Identifying this as an “error of the part for the whole,” Biber argued that cognitive functions cannot be set apart from the affective and social components to which they are inevitably and inextricably linked. Mastering bodies of knowledge and acquiring specific skills and techniques are achievements made in the service of larger psychological processes—competency, autonomy, creativity, and openness.

Today, Lagemann, President of the Spencer Foundation and a coauthor of the National Research Council’s report, “Scientific Research in Education,” is only too aware of a renewed federal concern with funding “research-based” programs, the risks of high stakes testing, and attempts by legislators to define research in the narrowest of ways. She is wary as well of the politics that demand simplistic answers, answers that do not reflect changing social realities and that cannot accommodate our deepening understanding of the complex ways that learning occurs in classrooms. Lagemann exhorts those who are committed to progressive education to make an equally strong commitment to rigorous forms of evaluation. This is evaluation that will stand up to the close scrutiny of multiple publics, that reflects the ways that progressive practices can be successful with culturally and economically diverse students, and that is immediately useful to practitioners and policy makers. Like Biber before her, Lagemann draws attention to the continuing viability of progressive programs within public settings. In the 1980s, this meant highlighting the success of the Open Corridor Program and Lillian Weber’s Workshop Center at City College in New York, while today it is Bank Street’s sponsorship of the Chicago small schools evaluation.

Thirty years ago, Biber named “distance” as a primary mechanism through which authority is artificially maintained between teachers and children, schools and parents. Now Lagemann’s call to “use-inspired research” echoes this earlier concern as she seeks to close another critical set of gaps— between teacher and researcher, researcher and policy maker. While Biber acknowledged the potential collaboration between the teacher who generates problem formation and the researcher who is steeped in the culture of the school, Lagemann adds a new emphasis on the place of policy makers in the research process. Eschewing traditional

linear relationships in which research is supposed to drive practice, Lagemann argues for a more realistic integration of research, policy, and practice, one that is fluid and reflective of mutual influence.

Evaluation is built into the progressive tradition. Making hypotheses, testing ideas, evaluating outcomes are at the very core of the scientific method so highly valued by Dewey and the founding members of the Bank Street community. It is what teachers do daily as they reflect upon their work and it is what they ask students to do as they engage with the world around them. From this perspective, evaluation is a tool that allows us to assess our effectiveness in achieving chosen goals, not the driving force behind curriculum design. This all-important choice of goals is ultimately about a social vision and the values embedded therein. These are not ends that can be field tested, but rather beliefs to which we adhere and a social contract to which we subscribe.

Ellen Lagemann's call for a more rigorous and conscientious evaluation of progressive practices is made in the interests of creating a more just society, one in which all children receive the education they deserve. It is a call we would do well to heed as we continue to educate parents and policy makers about the viability of progressive education in the twenty-first century and prepare for the legislative battles that are sure to come.