

MANPOWER PLANNING AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION:  
EFFICIENCY AND RELEVANCE FOR WHOM?

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The next several months--perhaps more so during the early 1970's--will no doubt reveal the untimely marriage between Vocational Education and a community of Manpower Planners. Section 123 of the New Amendments spells out the mechanics of what has the earmarks of developing into an expensive and theoretical exercise to achieve Alice's wish of making vocational education "efficiently relevant." The practical capabilities of existing manpower tools are disturbingly error saturated to incorporate desirable educational investment efficiency that Senate watchdogs envision.

In one way or another the well meaning writers of the Amendments have been prodded into accepting a ginger filled prospectus of vocational education outcomes by manpower planners clearly unable to deliver now or in the near future. Any manpower planner will agree that available planning tools are: (1) almost entirely market value oriented placing social overhead investments "outside" present programming capabilities, e.g., programs for disadvantaged persons; (2) lack sufficient precision in terms of being effectively sensitized, e.g., market supply factors, productivity, and technological change; and (3) do not possess sufficient disaggregation (practical refinement) for translating into curricular equivalents.

Perhaps the most serious limitation that current manpower planning poses to the American school is intrinsic to the planning exercise itself. Manpower planning requires data. Data generated by firms and organizations, that is, data with a market value. As a result manpower planning focuses on capital accumulation and institutions; the employee is transformed into an indirect bit of data to temper the "equasion"--but never to direct it. This inability to effectively translate social consequences of manpower training into market values is gradually obscuring the central figure in vocational education: the individual.

Our colleagues once told us that manpower programming would insulate the allocation of education resources from being governed by market forces. Yet, the almost exclusive use of market data is lashing the classroom directly to the economy.

To date manpower planners have generally considered their service as sort of an anti-coagulant, that is, to prevent manpower bottlenecks in assuring orderly economic growth. As a

result, it has seemed quite logical to the planner to penetrate the local classroom in quest of more equitable cost-benefit ratios for capital investments in vocational education.

One result of this logical intrusion is a new mentality concerning justification of vocational education programs. Planners are exceedingly quick to take a particular program to task for not being "really needed" because of low Effective Graduate Placement Rates (EGPR). EGPR is defined as obtaining a job, generally the student's first, in the specific field which the student has received occupational training.

Vocational educators are generally internalizing the dialects surrounding EGPR as the prime criteria for program modification and/or discontinuance. It is difficult indeed, or so we tell ourselves, to resist the "clean" quantitative dimensions of the EGPR in evaluating program effectiveness. Many of us are all too willing to grant a relationship between training and EGPR --particularly when the economy is balanced. However, confronted with a dynamic economy that is subject to constant technological turn-overs, and where each citizen has ready access to several score of occupations, the EGPR is subject to highly speculative interpretative errors. In effect, the EGPR mentality has only questionable value in the American school--perhaps more so in the planning community, but then that's another issue.

If we wanted to play the placement game, a much more realistic measure, particularly in the U.S. where every job title faces eminent extinction vis-a-vis the technology explosion, would be the employment rate of graduates--irrespective of job title.

If the present EGPR mentality gains widespread acceptance, students and staff will be cast as innocent children playing a game of occupational musical chairs.

In an attempt to bring the marriage off there are two realistic and practical contributions our planning colleagues can make. The first contribution is in the area of a reliable disaggregation and sensitizing of manpower planning techniques to market and extra-market factors. The second contribution is in assuming a leadership role in designing a meaningful concept of occupational behavior for reporting purposes which can readily be translated into curricular equivalents and is sensitive to technological changes.

Manpower projections to date have been macro in nature, for example, aimed at broad skill levels (white collar--blue collar, skilled, semi-skilled, etc.) and at sectors of the economy (mining, chemical, public, etc.). For the immediate future it would be helpful to effectively disaggregate generally

reported occupational information in terms of; (1) reporting job titles cutting across all economic sectors, and (2) reporting job task data by time performed--also across all job titles and sectors. The United States Department of Labor (USDL) is phasing into this type of manpower accounting. However, existing procedures contain unacceptable errors and omissions attributable to reporting techniques. For example, specific modification is required to disaggregating the reporting of public employees. Presently, a majority of these workers escape reporting by occupational title--one out of five people in the active labor force draws a public pay check. While job task information is not currently reported on a time performed basis, so reported it could readily be translated into educational equivalents.

More difficult are the problems of sensitizing manpower projections with productivity estimates specifically in terms of worker-output. It appears that for some time to come worker-output estimates will be based on piece-meal evidence and be subject to large marginal errors attributable to the "technology explosion." The stickiest quantification problems involve sensitizing planning equations with accurate market valuations of social variables such as: (1) valuations of student aspirations; (2) benefit valuations for investments in disadvantaged and/or handicapped citizens; (3) the educational conversion coefficients (valuations) for specific occupational training programs; (4) the price competitive industry is willing to pay for trained manpower; and (5) the "fluidity" valuation quotient of specific occupations laterally and vertically.

Legitimate questions can be asked concerning the functional value of specific occupational titles. There was a time when technology was latent, that a job title had virtually the same meaning to the student, economist, educator, and man-in-the-street. This is no longer the case. Each successive wave of new technology triggers structural changes in both the occupational and institutional matrix of the United States. The ring of job title associated with an old line firm does not sound true with the advent of multi-product firms and industrial conglomerates. In short, no one is really sure what Elsie the Cow is up to since "Elmer's Glue" was born.

The immediate task is to evolve a practical and logical manpower reporting schema which transcends the present USDL concept of a job title. An easily understood schema is required that can be insulated against the technological revolution and yet will accurately portray the manpower situation to the worker, student, human resource economist, educator, and layman.

USDL Job Titles and Standard Industrial Classifications as we presently know them, are historical artifacts! Any attempt at revision would require too much plastic surgery and would be dated before the print dried. This much is clear.

Just where the ultimate answer rests in developing a meaningful approach that converges on balanced vocational education programming is conjecture. A crucial and immediate decision needs to be made which will free resources in assisting the manpower planning community in crystalizing a fresh and meaningful approach to occupational programming. Unfortunately, nobody at the moment is suggesting a date when Alice's wish will come true.

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