Failsafe Education

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ABSTRACT

A third ideal-typical normative pattern of mobility in education is added to Ralph Turner's classic models of contest and sponsored mobility. The salient characteristics of the new "Failsafe" model are illustrated from the Ontario high school system. The impact of the new normative pattern on university education is illustrated from the author's own college. Student behaviour ranging from increased cheating to increased petitioning is related to the failsafe norms. The failsafe system lacks important selective functions of the contest and sponsored models, and has produced an excess of graduates "with elite skills, for whom there are no elite stations". False consciousness of students as individual "academic entrepreneurs" has thus far prevented the experience of frustration at "overqualification" from becoming a class protest.

RESUME

Education sans échouer

Un troisième système idéal-typique normal de mobilité en éducation est ajouté aux modèles classiques de concours et de mobilité garanti de Ralph Turner. Les caractéeristiques importants de ce nouveau modèle "sans échouer" sont illustrés dans le système secondaire Ontarien. L'impact de ce nouveau modèle normal au niveau universitaire est illustré au collège de l'auteur.

Il y a une augmentation de tricherie et de supplique et tout ceci se rapporte aux normes "sans échouer". Il manque à ce système "sans échouer" d'importantes fonctions choisies du concours et des modèles garantis ce qui produit un surplus de gradués aux habilités sophistiqués pour qui on ne peut trouver aucun poste sophistiqué. De fausses perceptions par les étudiants comme entrepreneurs académiques individuels a empêhé jusqu'à présent l'experiénce d'insuccès au niveau de surqualification de devenir un proteste général.

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In one of the most frequently cited papers in the sociology of education, Ralph H. Turner (1960) proposed two models of upward social mobility through education: sponsored mobility and contested mobility. Turner was concerned mainly with the differences between these two models, but it is also useful to note their similarities, three in particular: 1) a shared recognition of the school's function as a channel of upward social mobility, 2) a legitimation of this function "embedded in genuine folk norms," differing, of course, with each model, and 3) a process of selection which limited the upward mobility so as to control competition for elite status.

In the sponsored model, upward mobility is limited by restricting entry, at an early point in life, to the school stream leading to elite status. All those who are refused entry to the elite stream are diverted to alternative educational institutions. Turner's example was the English school system, in which the "eleven-plus" examinations limited enrolment in the grammar schools which provided pre-university education. This selection process prevented the emergence of "a dangerous number of angry young men who have elite skills without elite station." (Turner, 1960:134)

By contrast, the contest model admits everyone who wants to enter, not only at the bottom, but through various "second chances" such as junior colleges. The final selection is postponed as long as possible, so as to give everyone a chance to catch up with the front-runners. "In a sense, there is no final arrival under contest mobility, since each person may be displaced by newcomers throughout his life." (Turner, 1960: 128).

Social conflict occasioned by the selection process is managed differently in each model. "The most conspicuous control problem is that of ensuring loyalty in the disadvantaged classes toward a system under which they receive less than a proportionate share of society's goods." (1960:127). This is achieved in the contest mobility model by an emphasis on future opportunities, combined with a "fellow feeling" with those already in elite positions. In the sponsorship model, the majority of potential aspirants are persuaded early in life of their inferiority to the elite minority who are "called" to high status.

While the contest system forestalls rebellion among those who will eventually fail to achieve their expectations, by postponing a rigourous selection of the contest winners as long as possible, Turner regards the university as the locus of "the true contest" in the American educational system. (1960:133) It is at this stage that only a minority can hope to win. Turner contrasts the drop-out of about half of American university entrants prior to graduation, with the attainment of a degree by better than 80% of English university entrants.

Once "called" to elite status, an English student's deficiencies, if any, are accomodated or covered up, "in order to protect the united front of the elite to the outer world." (1960:129). The contest system, by contrast, enrols many more students than are expected to complete the school requirements, and then proceeds to eliminate the weakest without arousing their anger, by a process Burton R. Clark has described as "the cooling-out function in higher education." (1960).

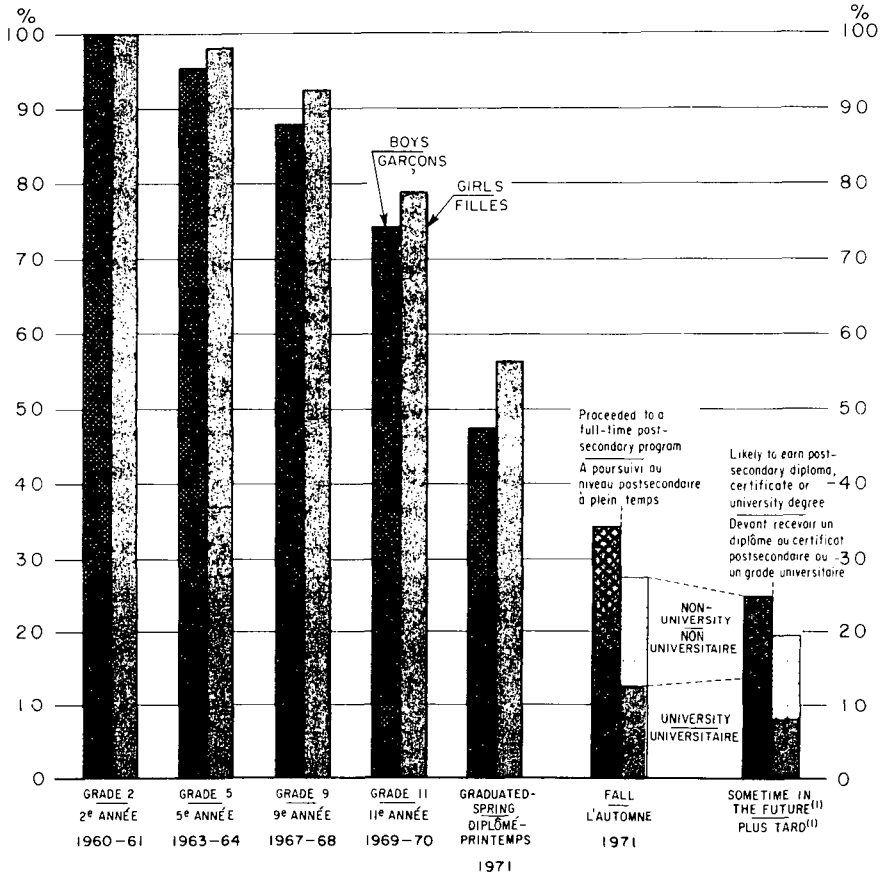
At least until recently, Canada's school systems have been patterned on Turner's contest model of educational mobility. Many more students were enrolled in high schools than completed their programs, and the weeding-out process continued through

the post-secondary level. The construction of many community colleges during the Sixties offered more high school graduates a continued channel of upward mobility, but drop-out rates have remained high. (Chart 1; cf. Statistics Canada, *Education Bulletin,* Vol. 1, no. 6)

Chart–1.6 Graphique–1.6

Estimated student retention, Canada, 1960–61 to 1971–72

Estimation de la persévérance scolaire, Canada, 1960–61 à 1971–72



(1) Either through pursuit of full-time or part-time studies. — En poursuivant des études à plein temps ou à temps partiel.

The function of the school as a channel of upward mobility for some who would not otherwise find means to alter their social class standing, should not be confused with the dream of utopian educators, that schools would perform a levelling effect on the social class structure. In the sponsored system, upper class students are assured elite stations, and are joined by the most able among lower class students, who are

selected for sponsorship at the "eleven-plus" examinations. Indeed, it has been suggested that this sponsorship system, far from improving the life chances of the whole working class, functioned to divest the lower class of its potential leadership. As for the contest system, it has clearly not provided the means by which large numbers of lower class students could attain elite status. (Pike, 1971, Jencks, 1972).

It is the purpose of this paper to examine a new model of education which, at least in the rhetoric of its advocates, does propose to level the social classes by providing equal life chances, at least to the age of twenty, for the vast majority of Canadians, who by law until the age of sixteen and by economic necessity for some years thereafter, are intended to remain within the school system. The new model will be called "failsafe."

As in any typology, models are constructed by emphasizing the most salient characteristics for the purposes of a given analysis. All three models discussed here are closer to McKinney's (1966:22) particular, time-bound types than to his universal types. However, the failsafe model, illustrated here by use of the Ontario education system in the Seventies, is by no means limited to that time and place.

The major distinguishing feature of the failsafe model is that it attempts to eliminate the experience of failure from the educational career. The "true contest" is postponed to post-graduate studies, or until employment is sought. At least to the B.A. or equivalent community college level, the failsafe model seeks to equalize life chances and avoid the alleged "negative" effects of failed efforts.

A belief in the socially constructive value of competitive effort is one of the most important features of our culture. (Mannheim, 1952:191ff). The sponsorship system of education moderated the impact of competition by selecting an elite who were regarded as possessing an established claim to status without further necessity of competitive defence of their position. The failsafe model goes further, and extends the same exemption from competition to all those who seek upward social mobility through the educational system.

To use the language of the Hall-Dennis report, every student "must be made to feel that the world is waiting for their sunrise." This report of the 1968 Ontario Provincial Committee on Aims and Objectives of Education in the Schools may be regarded as the Manifesto of the failsafe model. It argues: (Living and Learning, 1968:45)

> The needs of the child are simply stated. Each and every one has the right to learn, to play, to laugh, to dream, to dissent, to reach upward, and to be himself. Our children need to be treated as human beings, exquisite, complex and elegant in their diversity. They must be made to feel that the world is waiting for their sunrise, and that their education heralds a rebirth of the 'Age of Wonder' . . . Each will have learned, with Don Quixote, in Man of La Mancha:
>
> > To dream the impossible dream . . . [the whole of the lyrics of this song is then quoted].

Of course there is a considerable gap between the educational values of the Hall-Dennis Report, as partially implemented by official policies of the Ontario Ministry of Education, and the actual outcomes for students in the classroom. For many students, "the poor, the minorities," the school system remains "hopelessly rigged." (Wexler, 1974:21) Nevertheless, the values promoted by the Hall-Dennis report have, as will be

substantiated here, significantly altered the structure of the Ontario school system toward a failsafe model.

The Quiet Revolution in Ontario Education

The social history of the events by which a non-competitive philosophy of education captured the support of educational officialdom in Ontario has not yet been written, and is not the topic of this paper. However, a brief review of events is necessary as a background to our analysis.

Prior to 1960, Ontario's educational system was based on an assumed consensus of social values. Although affected to some extent by American progressivism, Ontario schools were still firmly rooted in British social thought. Nowhere is this more clear than in the massive report of the Royal Commission on Education in Ontario, the "Hope Report." From 1945 to 1950 this commission heard 475 witnesses, received 258 briefs, and produced a 933-page report. (Myers in Crittenden, 1969:11)

The Hope Report upheld the values of a stable society, with a nostalgic backward look to prewar times and a hope for return to "normalcy." But as Doublas Myers observes (1969:13):

> In many ways the Hope report can be considered the last rather uneasy huzzah for a school system and educational style designed to fit children into a society that was British, Christian, stable and hierarchical, in an Ontario in many ways fast disappearing.

The last attempt to resist fundamental change in the Ontario system was the Robarts Plan, announced in 1962 in response to a federal program of aid for vocational schools. In a five-year period, Ontario constructed 278 new technical and vocational schools. (Head, 1975:6). The Robarts Plan streamed students from the new immigrant groups and lower class largely into these schools, while better favoured English-speaking children were more likely to be streamed into academic high schools leading to university.

The Robarts Plan failed to stem the tide of social change which S. D. Clark has since called English Canada's "quiet revolution." (Clark, 1975:25). Canadian educators were avidly reading the radical writings of Americans such as John Holt, Paul Goodman and Edgar Friedenberg, and demonstrated a "strong tendency . . . to draw on American experience for their innovations." (King, 1975:1).

In 1965 the Ontario government appointed Justice E. M. Hall and Mr. L. A. Dennis to head an enquiry into the aims of education. Elementary teachers were strongly represented on the committee, and in the vanguard of pressure for change. Secondary teachers, by contrast, were caught off guard. As James Paton noted later, "Mr. Dennis' enthusiasm for change was infectious . . . but his Rousseauesque description of the nature and potential of children troubled a great many professional teachers, especially those experienced in working with adolescents." (1969:44) In fact it was 1973 before the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation produced a position paper on the Hall-Dennis Report, (Saunders, 1973:223), and 1975 before the OSSTF conducted a survey of its own members' attitudes to changes which had already taken place in the high schools five years earlier. (Head:1975).

As Chart 1 indicates, the processes of competition, and elimination or selection,

while already well under way in the formative years of primary school, do not begin to show structural effects until grade 9. Thus we will concentrate on the impact of the Hall-Dennis philosophy on the academic high schools – which, of course, feed directly into the university system.

The official instrument for implementation of Hall-Dennis in the high schools has been "H. S. 1," an annual instruction to all high schools from the Ministry of Education. In 1969, H.S. 1 announced proposals for change in the secondary school structure. The Robarts Plan was to be abandoned by stages, in favour of a credit system. All schools were expected to be fully transformed to the new system by 1972:

> Basic elements of the new pattern are 1) . . . a credit system . . . 2) . . . areas of study . . . 3) . . . courses [selected by students] . . . 4) . . . individual timetables. Each student should have a program suited to his individual needs and aspirations. A school should be student-centred . . . Courses should be offered at different levels of difficulty. A student's rate of progress through school should be in proportion to his own rate of maturing . . .

Almost all the fundamental elements of a "failsafe" model are present in this brief instruction. Steps in implementing the system are too numerous to describe in detail, but included abolition of province-wide "departmental" examinations for Grade 13, choice of school texts by local boards rather than a province-wide board, and local rather than province-wide standards of evaluation of students.

Students in the new H.S. 1 "credit system" could choose courses from a wide variety of options, to accumulate twenty-seven credits for a four-year diploma, or thirty-three for a five-year (university entrance) diploma. At first there were no compulsory credits, but in 1974 two credits in English and two in "Canadian studies" were required. In 1975 the required English credits were increased to four.

The compulsory credits are a partial admission of the inability of the "inquiry and discovery" approach to attract students to socially functional studies. The Hall-Dennis report had posed the rhetorical question: (Hall-Dennis, 1968:69)

> Should all pupils be taught by means of logically organized and separate courses in traditional subjects such as reading, spelling, arithmetic, history, science, literature and grammar, or should pupils enjoy the stimulation of lively ideas and be given ample opportunity to discuss them, with the satisfaction of learning by discovery?

The same report had urged teachers to attract students to learning rather than compel them. The effective teacher must "walk in beauty like the night, for he knows that intellect compounded with feeling moves toward the highest form of learning." (Hall-Dennis, 1968:46). Secondary school teachers have generally found themselves operating on a rather less romantic level. An OSSTF bulletin noted: (Saunders, 1973:4)

> In the end-of-term meetings on student progress, questions such as "Is this subject attracting enough students" or "Are failure rates too high (or too low)?" contaminate the discussion. Many teachers have already begun to worry that Gresham's law will apply to school programs.

The market analogy has proved an apt one. It would appear that popular courses, like bad money, might drive out useful but dull courses. Teachers of academic core subjects, however, have the advantage of a seller's market, so long as students are in-

tent on continued upward mobility through university. English, science, mathematics and Canadian Studies are safe from the effect of Gresham's law. They can charge high "prices" (hard work without exciting discovery) because demand is assured. Teachers of non-essential subjects, on the other hand, are in a buyer's market. To attract students they must offer easy credits, and run the risk of labelling as "mickey mouse" courses.

One of the major reforms of the new credit system was the abolition of recorded "failed attempts" in courses. A student's Ontario Student Record (OSR) now records only his successes. If a student fails to complete a course satisfactorily, the OSR remains silent.

The new practice hides a good deal of "wastage" (if we must no longer call it failure) in the credit system. No general data have emerged yet, but studies of sample high schools indicate that wastage, and drop-out of students, may be rising above pre-Hall-Dennis levels. (King, 1975:18ff). The greatest proportions of failed attempts to obtain credit appear to occur in the academic subjects which students require for university admission. Rates in mathematics range from 10% to 24% wastage in sample schools.

Ironically, the teachers of mathematics may be blamed for maintaining high standards. It has been suggested that "no individual or small bloc of teachers should have the power to slow or prevent the progress of all students in a school by maintaining disproportionately high failure rates in their courses." (King, 1975:4)

In short, those who fail students are subversive to the norms of the failsafe model.

Norms of the Failsafe Model

The core notion is that anyone allowed to follow his own interests at his own pace, can learn almost anything if given enough time. Or the same notion can be stated conversely, as in the title of Wilfred Wees' book, *Nobody Can Teach Anyone Anything.* (1971)

The "needs" of society are replaced by the "needs" of the student. (See Hall-Dennis quotation, page 4). However, the child whose needs are considered is out of *Emile* rather than *Lord of the Flies.*

"A child who is learning cannot fail." (Hall-Dennis, 1968:62). "Learning does not follow a set daily timetable." (1968:49) Schools must be student-centred, not content-centred. These are familiar norms of the failsafe model. Unlike the norms of Turner's two models, failsafe norms are not yet embedded in the folk culture. They are still controversial at the professional level.

The OSSTF Bulletin of October 1973 suggested "Every individual should have the right to fail and he can take responsibility for his failure." A task force in the ministry of education reported in 1972 a widespread concern that "the present child-centred philosophy should be discarded in favour of the old subject-centred system."

Evidence of the confusion about new norms of mobility in the educational system – that is, a state of anomie – is provided by the steady inflation in the average grades of high school graduates. No high school wants to disadvantage its graduates in the competition for university admission. There is no longer a province-wide standard based on "departmental" examinations. Marks are awarded locally, and it is no longer unusual for a small school to graduate several students with *averages* over 90%.

"Ontario Scholarship" winners, once a rare breed (a graduating average of 80% is required) amounted to 18% of the applicants to universities in 1975. Another sensitive index of the inflation in high school marks is the gap between average marks obtained by students in Grade 12, and averages obtained by the same students in Grade 13. This gap widened from 5% to 5.6% in the past year alone. (Scarborough College, 1975)

By one of those strange twists of history, the most devastating critique of the norms of the failsafe system was written fifteen years before its inauguration in Ontario in the Hall-Dennis report. Hilda Neatby's *So Little for the Mind* (1953) foresaw most major aspects of the failsafe model: strong American influence on Canadian educators, a Rousseauesque enthusiasm for the potential of all children, an urge to abolish the experience of failure, and a pervasive anti-intellectualism. Neatby particularly warned against imitation of the American educational innovations, which would fail to meet the needs of the Canadian situation. (1953:119)

Neatby's prophetic book warned: "The simple philosophic dreams of the eighteenth century, that men are all naturally intelligent, reasonable and moral, needing only the opportunity for a free and full development of their faculties" would lead to the "idea of a uniform low standard easily obtainable by almost all." (1953:38). Neatby predicted that a system which assumes that "failure spoils the record" and that "democracy demands that children should all go to the same school and that none should fail" would inevitably lead to a lowest common denominator of intellectual enterprise, and thus to an attitude of anti-intellectualism in the schools. Her concern was echoed by critics of the Hall-Dennis report sixteen years later. G. L. McDiarmid, for example, castigated the "suffusing anti-intellectual view of the world" underlying the report's philosophy. (Crittenden 1969:87).

Failsafe Reaches The Colleges

Graduates of Ontario high schools who knew only the failsafe model of education began to appear in university freshman classes in 1973. By 1977 the vast majority of university enrolment will be drawn from the failsafe high school system. This could be the year of a critical confrontation between the new failsafe norms and the previous contest norms which have generally governed the university system. However, the conflict between the two systems is already evident.

The model we will use to demonstrate this conflict, and the resultant effects on the university system, will be Scarborough College in the University of Toronto. Although the events to be described are by no means limited to this college (and parallels elsewhere will be noted), there are several reasons for this choice.

Scarborough College was the first Ontario university institution to announce an "at your own pace" degree program. It was already the locale of a previous, but unsuccessful major innovation in Ontario education – the extensive use of instructional television in the classroom. (Lee, 1971). It is the author's place of professional employment, and the author has been active in curriculum development in the college. He has had a better than average opportunity to observe the conflicts of normative standards which have marked the transition of the college from a contest to failsafe model of education. Professors and students in other university institutions, and in other provinces, will be

best able to judge whether the conditions now prevailing at Scarborough College are significant for the future of their own institutions.

The Scarborough College failsafe model now includes the following features:

1. The at-your-own pace degree. The central norm of the failsafe model is the concept of continued upward mobility through the educational system, uninterrupted by the experience of failure. Some may take longer, even much longer, than others to reach the goal, but everyone has the opportunity to reach the goal at his or her own "pace." The 1975 calendar of the college reads:

> . . . the academic programme at Scarborough College is now a distinctive one . . . Each student plans his own program of studies from amongst all of the courses available. There are no compulsory courses, no compulsory areas of study, no 'major' requirements. Rather students choose courses best suited to their individual interests and intellectual abilities . . . Each student may also plan his own rate of progress toward his degree. (p. 18)

This type of degree required the abandonment of the "year" system, and abolished the distinction between "full time" and "part time" students. A student now has an accumulation of credits. However, for purposes of some college rules, students are still considered as if in the "first year" of study for the first five credits (the second year for credits six to ten, etc), and the majority of students still enrol in five credits a year. Other colleges have begun to adopt the same approach. (See, for example, Brock University Calendar, pages 24-26).

2. Relatively low entrance requirements. The failsafe model much expanded the contest model's feature of open access to the race, and modified it with more "second chances" which now incorporate a near-sponsored concept, namely that anyone who lacks the requirements to enter the race, should be helped to acquire them by those administering the race.

Until 1975, admission to Scarborough College was significantly easier than to the St. George campus of the same university. The minimum Grade 13 average required was 60% in the student's best six subjects. St. George campus colleges required about 74%. Scarborough was a relatively new college, actively recruiting applications. In this respect it was in the same position as new universities in smaller centres of Ontario, where admission requirements were equally low in order to attract enrolment.

In addition, the college allowed enrolment for mature students through pre-university courses, similar to those on the St. George campus and elsewhere. Moreover, some students were allowed enrolment with below the 60% minimum, after appeal to special considerations and compassionate grounds. Again, this is by no means limited to Scarborough. (See for example, page 20 of the Brock University calendar).

By 1975 the college was fully enrolled, and could raise its entrance requirements to 67%. However, this may not represent a hindrance to high school students, since the inflation in average marks of Ontario high school graduates from 1965 to 1975 probably exceeds 7 percentage points, so their relative position in the race remains unchanged.

3. Minimum definition of subject mastery required for a degree. As the Scarborough calendar states, (quoted above), "there are no compulsory courses." The college is far from unique in abandoning the traditional liberal arts education, in which certain con-

tent was regarded as essential to an educated person. The university contest used to involve somewhat the same route for every contestant. Now each runner can map his own race across whatever country he or she regards as most interesting, or least difficult. The idealistic aim of the non-compulsory system is that each student "plans his own program of studies" to enjoy "learning by discovery" and achieve the maximum self-fulfilment of his own personal needs. (see Hall-Dennis, quoted on pages 36 and 38).

The reality appears to include a propensity for students to choose courses which will lead to greater opportunities of employment, combined with courses which will produce as high an average grade as possible. One indication of the distance by which reality falls short of ideals, was the necessity to enact a rule in the college in 1975, banning enrolment in "propaedeutic" courses by students with advanced standing. Students who had achieved "third year" standing in a subject area were enrolling in "first year" courses in the same subject area, virtually guaranteeing themselves an easy credit.

Another indication is the increasing tendency for students to seek credit for courses in which they have already achieved a mastery of the subject matter from such sources as outside employment or ethnic background. Examples include applications for credit in computer science, and in language courses such as French or Italian, by those originating in these language groups.

The selection of a program of studies leading to an easy degree is a widespread practice in the new "cafeteria-style" college. Ironically, students who petition for exceptions from regular course selection rules frequently go out of their way to prove that their request is *not* motivated by an easy credit, and that in effect they are making their task more difficult.

4. Generous allowances for error in the race. Any student who has made the error of enrolling in a course in which he or she is unlikely to obtain a suitably high mark, may correct this error almost up to the finish line, and win an opportunity to "return to Go" and start again. All that is lost is the fee for the course and the time wasted on the sidetrack. There is no record on the student's transcript to indicate how many such abortive attempts were made, and no limit on their number.

This application of the failsafe norm is achieved by allowing students to withdraw "without academic penalty" from any course, without explanation, up to a few weeks before the completion of the course. At Scarborough College the withdrawal deadline is March 15th, for a year-long course beginning in September and ending early in April. Even after this deadline a student may petition for late withdrawal, and is likely to be accomodated. Between 1973 and 1975, the norm for granting such petitions in the college shifted radically. Under the old contest model, the committee dealing with withdrawals operated on the principle: "The committee should not come to the aid of a failing student" (by letting him out of a course late in the year). Under the new model, the principle is "What is the point of forcing a student to stay in a course he is likely to fail?"

Of course, an increasing number of students withdraw from attempted courses not from fear of failure, but fear of a low passing mark. One of the most debated petitions in the college's history involved a student who, on "compassionate grounds" sought late withdrawal from a course in which he was obtaining a good B standing, but wanted

an A standing in order to assure entry into graduate school. (For details on petitions and the failsafe model, see the author's *Bending the Rules,* 1975).

Scarborough College is far from unique in permitting last-minute withdrawals to avoid failure or a low mark. The 1975 calendars of McMaster, Carleton, Guelph and Trent universities show similarly late deadlines. The most generous is that of Brock University, where a student may withdraw from a course without academic penalty up to the last day of lectures.

5. Ample allowance for failed courses. If a student follows a sidetrack right to a dead end, he or she is still not out of the race, though there might be a temporary handicap. A Scarborough student is permitted twenty recorded attempts for a 15-credit ("three year") degree, and twenty-six for a 20-credit degree. Withdrawn attempts (point 4 above) are not counted. However, if a student fails too many courses in a given "year" probation or suspension may result.

6. Forgiven suspensions. The most severe handicap a student may suffer, while still remaining eligible to continue in the race, is a three-year suspension. This may be earned in several ways – for example, failing four courses. However, not only is the number of such students small (see point 8 below), but is further reduced by successful student petitions. In 1974, eleven students were forgiven their suspensions, and five of these successfully remained enrolled in 1975. In what is colloquially known as "the rescue operation" a suspended student may be permitted to return to college before the end of the suspension period, providing he or she maintains a minimum academic standard well above that of the college rules, for at least two courses.

7. Minimum requirements to earn a degree. Scarborough College, like many other educational institutions in Ontario, does not require unusual performance from students in order to achieve certification. A B.A. or B.Sc. degree may be earned with a mark of 60% in half the credits required, and a mark of 50% in the remainder. Of course the student with such minimum achievement is not likely to gain entrance to post-graduate study.

8. Easy marks. Naturally most students are not satisfied with a minimum degree, with half their marks at C and the rest at D. Competition for post-graduate training has become increasingly fierce (see page 50 below). Students are no longer content even with an A at 80% – they visit the professor to argue for a higher A mark of 85 or even 90%.

There is evidence that an increasing proportion of faculty are unwilling to disadvantage their students by awarding low marks, reflecting the same norm as in the failsafe high school. (pages 38-39 above). Thus the *average* mark awarded to a student at Scarborough College is now 70% or better. In 1975 the distribution of marks among 4400 students in 21,133 courses was as follows:

A (80%+)	B (70-79%)	C (60-69%)	D (50-59%)
3322 courses	7422 courses	6070 courses	2819 courses
(15.7%)	(35.1%)	(28.7%)	(13.2%)

The remaining 1500 courses (7% of the total) were failed. The failure rate itself dropped from 9.1% of courses in 1973 to the 7% rate in 1975, and the steady upward drift toward an average mark of B, while now the topic of considerable and concerned

discussion in the college, has not slowed down. On the St. George campus of the University of Toronto, a special advisory committee (the "Dunphy committee") has attempted to write descriptions of mark levels which accord the C grade a respectable status, but there is no indication that students can be dissuaded from their present widespread conviction that a C is something of a disgrace. That it is at least *below average* is now a statistical fact at Scarborough.

9. Very low rates of "real failure." The failsafe model is an ideal type, not yet realized in practice, if indeed it ever will be. But the Scarborough example is getting quite close. In 1975, only two students in 4400 could be considered to have truly "failed" as only these two received such poor marks that they were denied further enrolment. Even their fate might be reversed on compassionate grounds by a petition.

A further sixty-seven students were suspended for one to three years. At the end of their suspension – or earlier if they petition successfully – they can return to complete their degree at their own pace. Thus, in the most generous estimate, only sixty-nine students, or 1.5% of those enrolled, could be said, in the language of the old contest model, to have "failed their year." The failsafe model stands in marked contrast to the contest mobility system, where, "for large numbers, failure is inevitable and structured." (Clark, 1960:571).

10. Compensatory compassion. Perhaps the most subtle norm of the failsafe model is the notion that students who lack the necessary ability to cope with the demands of the educational institution should receive sympathy and assistance. Compassion has replaced contest. For critics of failsafe, this norm is the most insidious, for it directly challenges the meritocratic ideology implicit in previous models. Worse, it seems to replace the intellectual enterprise with a complex system of "courts of Chancery" in which students seek certification as a matter of equity. Some students are literally hiring lawyers and going to court to obtain their degrees.

There is certainly a "politics of stupidity" as described by Lewis Dexter (1974). Ironically, the failsafe model has met the challenge of this politics by treating "stupidity" as a legitimate object for compassion, as one might a physical illness. Rather than work toward a society where differences of merit would not imply differences of status, the failsafe system accepts the equation of merit with status, but then attempts to provide everyone with the same eventual status, by compensating for lack of demonstrable merit through elimination of failure.

All of the already-outlined features of the failsafe model work to this end – especially the opportunity to proceed at your own pace, so that even the "slowest" student (in both the achievement and ability senses of the term) can eventually "win." But compensatory compassion is the subtle ideological cement which seems to hold the rest of the system together.

At Scarborough College, the major implement for exercising compensatory compassion is the student petition. Its import is best indicated by a recent College Council motion, "viewing with alarm the increasing number of petitions." In the past two years the number of petitions has increased from approximately one per ten students enrolled per year, to about one per seven students. (cf. Lee, 1975). In a ten-month period of 1975 there were 585 petitions. (Scarborough College, 1975)

The academic petition is not found in the high school system, and long predates

the inauguration of the failsafe model in the universities. However, under the old contest system, a student plea for "special consideration" had to demonstrate that the rules were working to deny him "an equal footing" in a race where "victory must be won solely by one's own efforts." (Turner, 1960:124). Requests for exceptions from the rules were frequently challenged: "If we do it for one, we'll have to do it for everyone."

Within the failsafe system the academic petition has assumed a new social function, much closer to the "cover" operation noted by Turner in the sponsored model. (1960: 129, see page 2 above). Petitions accomodate the system to the idiosyncratic needs of the student, so as to avoid the necessity of "cooling him out." They preserve the failsafe college from potential attack by those who would argue that they are being denied a fair opportunity to achieve the certification which has become increasingly necessary for employment.

Since student petitions and the concept of compensatory compassion are central to the failsafe model, we will consider these in detail below. However, to conclude our catalogue of the features of the failsafe model as exemplified at Scarborough College, we must note a final feature.

11. The assured first-class degree. This feature is not yet in place at Scarborough, and may never be. However, the social pressure for its inauguration is evident and growing. The logic is simple. Every student has the "right" to proceed to a degree at his own pace, supported by the failsafe structure already outlined, and a degree is only meaningful (under contemporary competitive conditions in post-graduate education) if it is a first-class degree. Therefore every student should have the right to earn a first-class degree, and the time necessary to do so, together with whatever compensatory compassion is required.

Evidence of this logic is already available. Students are now petitioning to re-enrol in a course already attempted and passed, in order to obtain a higher mark. One student, after being allowed such a petition, increased his mark in a subject from 54% to 60%. He then petitioned to enrol again, because he needed this subject (and a high mark in it) in order to proceed in his anticipated post-graduate field. The second petition was denied. In a fully failsafe college, it would be granted. Not only must all who run have prizes – they must be as good as the prize won by the front-runner.

Another indicator of the pressure for a fully failsafe model is the increasing number of students who appeal for a new examination after receiving their marks. College rules require such appeals before the end of the examination period, in order to assure true compassionate grounds rather than mere post hoc attempts to improve marks. But late petitions have been granted.

Yet another indicator is the number of students who are missing final examinations, then appealing that they misread the timetable. In one difficult subject, eight students all made the "honest error" of missing the examination in 1975. Despite strong opposition, the college council decided that all such students had the right to a new examination, without prescribing means for distinguishing honest error from fraud.

Bending the Rules

In the interim before the implementation of a complete failsafe model in which every

student is eventually assured of a first-class degree, students are apparently learning how to achieve the same result by "craft." Turner noted that one of the norms of the contest system was that "Enterprise . . . and craft are admirable qualities if they allow the person initially at a disadvantage to triumph." (1960:122).

Turner had in mind the craft of the tortoise racing with the hare, and was not advocating "craft" which "leaves considerable leeway for unscrupulous success." (1960:129). We will distinguish these two outcomes of craft as *bending the rules* through such devices as student petitions, and *breaking the rules,* through outright cheating.

A study of all student petitions submitted in 1972 and 1973 at Scarborough College, revealed a 58% rate of success in obtaining the desired exception from college rules. (Lee, 1975). In addition, some students appealed negative rulings and won, so that over 60% of petitions were successful. This was a period in which the Academic Standing Committee of the college took a stern view of several issues – such as late withdrawal from courses – which has radically altered to a "softer" position. Student members are now more active in the Committee and several changes in committee proceedings have improved the chances of success of a petition.

A greater proportion of petitions originate with male students (corrected for their numbers in the college), but a greater proportion of female petitioners are successful. This is generally because the female petitioners tend to offer the committee more obvious grounds for compensatory compassion, such as illness, marital problems, problems with parents, and so forth. Of course, compassion may be broadly defined. For example, the committee has granted petitions related to anxiety and suffering arising from a broken engagement.

Male petitioners have tended to cloud their appeal to compensatory compassion by more direct challenges to those features of the contest model still operative in the college. That is, they have argued for exceptions because of difficulty with academic demands in courses, work overload, the stress of school work combined with part-time gainful employment, and so forth.

The differences in status and career orientation of male and female students in Ontario schools have been analysed elsewhere. (Hall, 1962). Males have frequently been noted to be less compliant with rules of educational institutions. Although many female students are continuing in college to a degree, their career orientation is likely to be subordinate to their plans for marriage and a family. (Perrucci and Targ, 1974: 376) The pressure to obtain a creditable degree for further advancement in post-graduate studies or employment is still greatest for male students.

The epitome of male student opposition to college rules was clearly expressed in the 1975 Scarborough College Student Council handbook, edited by four male students. An article titled simply "Survival" advised students to take a cynical, almost anarchistic role:

*On attending classes: . . . The most important factor to remember while you're sitting there is not 'what are you learning' but 'for whom are you learning.'

*You will find that it is often *who* not what you know that will guarantee your success. This will become evident next summer when your friend who did nothing all year graduates with the same percentage as you, though you worked twice as hard.

*If someone gives you hell or leans on you, don't be afraid to squawk.

*If you want to know what the rules are, break them.

*. . .So if you want something, ask for it and hound them until you get it.

*Never accept 'No' for an answer. In a university nothing is impossible; some things just take longer . . . If you seem to be getting nowhere, you may have to play by the rules of the game and submit a formal petition.

As examples of the arguments on which student have formally appealed for compensatory compassion, in the form of new examinations, essay extensions, late withdrawals, and various other exceptions from the rules, the following are "reasons" given: difficulty in obtaining a textbook; helping parents to pack for a trip; having an essay mislaid by grandmother; memory block during an examination; lost time through helping a friend with personal problems; acute anxiety during study for an examination; suffering the disadvantages of life in a large family; inability to concentrate on studies due to recent marriage; missed lectures due to serving a jail sentence for theft of college labratory equipment. The majority of these petitions were successful.

The language of student petitions makes it clear that the failsafe model is becoming "embedded in genuine folk norms" (Turner, 1960:139) at least insofar as the college student culture is affected. One student wrote:

> I've been told and told that it's impossible . . . but I'm asking that the rules be set aside in this case. It must be remembered that I'm the student here; the rules are guidelines, not law. There isn't any reason for not allowing me to do so. Somebody can do something!

Burton Clark argued in 1960 that colleges required "cooling out functions" to prevent student from recognizing the dissociation between the culturally instilled ambitions related to an open-door admission policy and the institutional limitations on success. (Clark, 1960:570ff). Turner noted the important role of social control mechanisms to deal with the possibility of "a dangerous number of angry young men" drawn to seek elite skills with no hope of elite station.

The dissociation appears to have been recognized by students, and the social control mechanisms appear to be breaking down. At present, the resulting stress is being directed against immediate competitors. Like underpaid, hungry factory workers, students are competing with each other to circumvent the production norms, rather than organizing in unions to confront the institution.

Student leadership, like that of the Scarborough student council in its handbook, is only dimly aware of the common status and fate of the students. While "Survival" advises "Take an interest in your course clubs" there is no attempt to deal with the false consciousness which drives students to seek degrees. Instead, students are frankly advised to sabotage the system individually and anarchistically. They are advised to bend, and where necessary, to break the rules.

Breaking the Rules

As John Lofland points out (1969:104), much deviant behaviour may be regarded as risk-taking activity. It finds legitimation in the more or less organized subculture in

which the risks are perceived as necessary in order to increase the opportunities to achieve culturally approved goals. If college students believe that, once enrolled, they have the right to graduate with a degree, but find that institutionally approved means do not unconditionally assure this outcome, then a basis exists for legitimation of "cheating the system." It is highly unlikely that students will perceive such behaviour within the old normative definition, that is, as "really cheating yourself."

A growing number of students now perceive cheating not as an individual deviant act, but as a legitimate means of coping with a malfunction in the college system which threatens to deny them an equitable outcome – that is, a degree. At Scarborough College, cheating is no longer a minority activity, but a majority practice.

A 1973 study of Scarborough College students showed that 43% admitted "cheating," which was broadly defined to include plagiarization as well as more direct forms such as cheat-notes in examinations and submission of purchased essays. Cheating students at that time already indicated that they regarded norms against cheating as "teacher's norms" rather than their own. Only 33% of the cheating students felt that their close friends disapproved of their cheating. (Lee, 1973).

By 1975 a majority of students in each of several different samples, admitted to regular cheating. Moreover, 64% of the admitted cheating students reported that their closest friends also cheated. Most significantly, the definition of cheating had altered, so that ordinary plagiarization could no longer be included. If it were, then over ninety percent of students would be cheating. Even with a new "hard core" definition of cheating, restricted to borrowing or purchasing an essay to submit as your own, copying other students during examinations, and using cheat notes in exams, 54% of the males and 34% of the females admitted such activities.

New data also revealed that cheating was far from a one-time activity; the majority in senior years had cheated several times, some ten times or more. Less than a quarter of the admitted cheaters had ever been caught for even one offence, thus the detection rate per offence must be low indeed. Clearly it is student experience that cheating pays off. (Lee, 1975)

The presentation of an essay by another person as one's own work is no longer a secretive practice. *The Varsity,* the University of Toronto student newspaper, until a recent change in policy regularly carried advertisements from suppliers of term papers, and enquiries for papers from students who could easily be identified, if anyone cared to do so:

> Wanted: someone to write Canadian political science essay. Willing to pay up to $15. Phone . . . between 4 and 8 pm.
>
> Have you any short written report on the immigrant, his influence in society. Please call . . .
>
> Essays wanted: anything relating to 1) 16th century English literature, 2) medieval philosophy, 3) Marx. Out of town student. Phone . . .

Another form of "cheating" which is gaining legitimation among students is the activity of "doubling." The student arranges essay topics in two or three different courses so that the same essay will meet all criteria. An essay on "The Yonge Street strip" might serve in urban sociology, deviant behaviour, and social change, for example.

One student was recently detected submitting identical papers to three courses, despite warnings that essays must be original. He could see no offence, as the content was "relevant" to each course.

Surveys of student attitudes to cheating, and penalization of those caught, indicate a trend toward the legitimation of cheating to cope with the role strain of the student (I have too much work to do it all myself); the patterned evasion of norms (Everyone else in the class is cheating; I have to keep my marks up); and the collapse of social control (The professors don't even notice who's cheating any more). The last comment finds its mirror image in the attitude of more professors today, that detection of cheating is hardly worth the time. "The student will deny it anyway, and the administration won't back you up. It will simply lead to a lot of hearings, arguments, appeals," runs the typical complaint.

New academic discipline rules of the university prevent any sanction against a cheating student beyond a zero mark for the work in question. The days when a student could be disbarred ("sent down") for violating the code of honour of the intellectual guild, have passed away.

The Great Training Robbery

The Protestant work ethic that "all who work hard and honestly, whatever their calling may be, are partners in the good society" (Hope Report, 1950:38) probably did not fool most of the students in the contest model of North American education. Despite the efforts of proponents of the work-ethic ideology, the majority of university students in the Fifties understood that success is what mattered. However, they were prepared to strive for success within the norms of the contest model.

Through an elaborate system of entrance requirements, scholarships, prizes, honour programs, specialized degrees and competitive class lists (published in the daily newspapers at graduation time, with standings!), the contest mobility system kept alive a false consciousness in which the able student was led to identify with the masters of the academic guild. This consciousness stimulated but also regulated competition with one's classmates, and directed conflict away from the professors who monitored the race and "cooled out" the losers.

The Sixties saw an outburst of class-consciousness among students, who recognized a common fate in conflict with the factory-like "multiversity." (Rowntree, 1968). Critics of the contest model provided a rationale and tactics for student protest and revolution on campus. (Goodman, 1962; Warshaw, 1965; Farber, 1969)

The power elite of North American society demonstrated its flexibility of response to challenge in education as in other areas where the "youth culture" of the Sixties attacked its hegemony. The failsafe model of education is a classic example of Marcuse's "repressive desublimation." (1969:74ff). Just as the power elite adapted to the challenges of youth and women by a politically repressive but individually permissive "liberation" of sexual ethics associated with the ruling ideology, so likewise in education a "palace reform" from the top of the Ontario educational system has accomodated to the demands for "liberation" in the schools.

In actuality, the credit system, with its apparent freedom of choice, its elimination of failure, its accomodation to the "pace" of the student, has altered nothing in the

fundamental power structure of the province. If anything, the traditional advantages of the right private school, the right family background, and the appropriate income level, seem as operative as selection factors in final success on the ladder of upward social mobility, as ever before. (Clement, 1975).

The failsafe system has created the appearance of equality of opportunity for all through assured upward mobility in the educational system. In fact it has merely postponed the day of division of sheep from goats, while in the process subjecting many thousands of students to years of training which will ultimately prove useless. The failsafe system is performing Ivar Berg's "great training robbery" even better than the contest model he criticized. (Berg, 1970).

The Varsity noted on October 28, 1974:

> In 1970, there were 1081 applications for 150 places at the Faculty of Law. This year there were 2649 applications for 158 places . . . Five years ago, there were 1100 applications for 208 places at the Faculty of Medicine. This year, although the number of places available has increased to 240, the number of applicants has more than doubled to 2350. (p.6)

With each increase in the number of qualified applicants, post-graduate schools and employers alike simply raise the minimum admission or hiring requirements in order to limit the number of those "with elite skills" who will be admitted to "elite station." In 1975 some 58,430 students graduated in psychology in the United States, but only 4300 new jobs for persons with this training opened up. (Bird, 1975). Statistics Canada estimated that between 1973 and 1980, 2.5 million Canadians will receive university and community college training, but only 600,000 job openings would require such qualifications. (*Toronto Star*: June 1975")

For perhaps a decade, the mounting demand for educational qualifications tended to feed on itself. In the United States, about half of the newly qualified graduates went into teaching jobs in new colleges, to train still more graduates. (Berg, 1970:178). In Canada the expansion was even more self-feeding, opening new positions not only for Canadians but also for the overflow from the United States. Today all that has changed, and simulation models of growth in Ontario universities indicate near-stagnation and even decline in some disciplines. There certainly won't be enough new teaching positions to absorb more than a tiny fraction of the newly qualified graduates. (cf. McKie, 1975).

Government disenchantment with the failsafe model has already begun, largely as a result of economic pressures. In Ontario, spending on post-secondary education is being sharply restricted. The period of self-perpetuating growth has ended. At Scarborough College the effect of "putting the lid on" is already painfully apparent. The end of expansion of student enrolment has led to hard budget cuts, and an inevitable rise in students per faculty member, since there are no funds to hire additional faculty.

Crowded classrooms will prove doubly discouraging to upwardly mobile students. As the quality of their training declines in the classroom, they will be pressed to more cheating and petitioning to obtain creditable standings. At the same time, there will be fewer openings in the school system when they seek employment. Cynicism and frustration will multiply.

The failsafe system has failed in one of the vital functions noted by Turner for both

the contest and sponsored mobility models – the process of selection which limits competition for elite status. Instead, the failsafe norms have facilitated the achievement of advanced skills by many who appear to have little hope of elite stations. Thus the potential now exists for a class-conscious political movement among the over-qualified unemployed. This social category could call on their advanced training for insights and tactics if collective action were taken.

There are few indications yet that collective action will occur. Unlike an excess of skilled workers driven to form "union shops" or take other measures to restrict upward mobility within their own labour market, so as to prevent employers from using the surplus in their ranks to depress job opportunities and rewards, university graduates still remain divided from each other by the false consciousness of the academic enterprise. They see themselves as individual entrepreneurs, equivalent to the bourgeoisie rather than working people.

Thus the tactics for dealing with excessive competition in the academic marketplace have generally been of the individual type – sabatoge and manipulation of the system by cheating and petitions – rather than the collective type. Student anger has been effectively redirected against fellow students by means of the failsafe norms which appear to give each individual student broad freedom to choose his own academic career. The failsafe model has had the same "liberating" effect on students, as the early factory system which "liberated" workers from appretice-master bonds, but left them exposed to the full impact of impersonal market forces.

There is convincing evidence of the failure of the schools to create opportunities for upward social mobility. (cf. Coleman, 1966; Jencks, 1972; Clement; 1975, Stamp, 1975). Despite its noble aims and utopian rhetoric, the failsafe system does not appear to have significantly altered the situation. For most students originating in lower class environments, a substantial improvement of life chances by means of educational achievement, remains an impossible dream. When everyone else is obtaining the same accreditation, even at slower paces, there remains little advantage for the frontrunner. If anything, the failsafe rhetoric seems to be misleading students into wasting a great deal of time and effort in schools, while real levels of failed effort are hidden. (*Toronto Star,* March, 1975).

A final feature to be noted in the false consciousness which prevents individual academic entrepreneurs from recognizing the collectively fateful impact of the failsafe system as a "great training robbery" is the contemporary emphasis on jobs with "psychic income." (Bird, 1975). The movement of the Sixties for self-actualization (for example, through sensitivity and encounter groups) has had the ironic educational outcome of degradation of work itself. Many students are seeking to assure themselves not only the life chances of an affluent middle class standing, but also work that is "mentally creative" – research, planning and teaching. "Dull work" is to be avoided.

Thus, paradoxically, those who find themselves at the end of the failsafe system with qualifications which disqualify them from many unpretentious job opportunities, are not directing their frustration at the schools which prepared them for this fate. Instead, they are actually returning for still more training – a second M.A. or even a second PhD. It begins to appear that the elimination of failure as a significant experience in the school career reduces the likelihood of *confrontation.* The failsafe system's

postponement and attentuation of any encounter with barriers, performs the ultimate repressive desublimation.

As the extreme example thus far developed of an educational system which ignores the fact that the most important learning experiences (such as learning one's own language) still occur outside the schools, the failsafe model has convinced vast cohorts of Canadian students that formal education is of great value. But the world is not waiting for their sunrise. [end]

Sources

I am grateful to Professor Jim King, Associate Dean and Registrar of Scarborough College, W. Kent, Director of Admissions, University of Toronto, Jim Head, Research Director of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation, and M. Wisenthal of Statistics Canada, for data concerning student enrolment and achievement patterns used throughout this paper; and to Professor Robert McKay, University of Toronto, for critical comments on the normative patterns of the failsafe model.

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