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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ADAPT Faculty: Who Are They?

Robert G. Fuller

You have had a chance to read about the ADAPT program. The presentations in this book are as varied as the styles of the people who participated in the ADAPT project. Amidst all of this variety of information, you may be wondering just what the essential features of the ADAPT program really are. Is it essential to have six different disciplines in the program? Does it make any difference which six disciplines you choose? Do evaluating psychologists play a key role in such a project? There are, I believe, two necessary conditions for starting an ADAPT-type program.

First, you must find a core group of first-rate, tenured faculty members who are willing to participate in the project. The necessity for tenure for the project staff persons arises because the additional effort required to work in an ADAPT-like program is likely to take time away from other scholarly activities upon which promotion and tenure decisions are based. First-rate faculty members, by my definition, will have the following characteristics.

(1) Professional competence in their disciplines. Faculty persons unsure of their own professional competence may not be willing to depart from the usual teaching methods of their disciplines. ADAPT staff persons spent time in such activities as counting play money and watching glass beads roll off the edge of the table. These are hardly activities designed to impress professional colleagues. Only persons who feel "OK" in their disciplines will be free to risk large departures from the usual behavior of college professors.

(2) Concern for student learning and willingness to try alternative instructional strategies. These two attributes need to be combined in an ADAPT staff person. Sometimes professors decry the poor performance of the students in their courses. Professors who respond to poor student performance by lecturing more slowly and/or putting fewer questions on examinations are unlikely candidates for an ADAPT project. Professors who have countered student learning difficulties with tutorials, or small group work or role playing, simulation and game activities, or repeatable testing, or Keller Plan instruction, etc. are much more likely to make an effective contribution to an ADAPT program.

(3) Evidence of having heard a student's questions. Most of the instructional strategies mentioned above will personalize the relationship between the professor and the student. In such a relationship the professor can really hear a student's own authentic questions. Upon hearing real student questions, a concerned professor may become aware, at least subconsciously, that some students live in a special world. For these students all answers are either right or wrong. For them actions and motives are either good or bad. Their books and poems have a correct meaning. Their history is primarily a collection of facts and dates. Their economics and anthropology are pre-causal, e.g., lower state taxes and lower state university tuitions in a general inflationary period are compatible and human behavior just happens. Their thinking in mathematics and physics includes neither proportional nor propositional reasoning.

On the basis of all these experiences a first-rate faculty member may perceive that the fundamental cause of poor student learning is not low mastery of course content but is a narrow, rigid student worldview. Such a faculty person is prepared to participate in an ADAPT-type project.

The second necessary condition is for the core group to undertake a program to study the theory and research related to a scheme for understanding student development. In guiding this study program the evaluation psychologists can make a valuable contribution to the project. Neither learning theory nor educational psychology seem to have high professional prestige in the more traditional university disciplines. Some professors who have a perception of the student worldview mentioned above may not be willing to seek new insights into solving the problem of poor student learning in their discipline by studying some other discipline. The ADAPT staff began by studying the research on and theory of cognitive development reported by Jean Piaget and his collaborators. The staff reviewed attempts to practicalize Piaget's work into curricula and instructional strategies, particularly the work of Robert Karplus and in his co-workers in the Science Curriculum Improvement Study. Then the ADAPT staff modified those concepts and strategies to fit their college teaching in their separate disciplines. The ability of the ADAPT staff to work together creatively was increased by their commitment to risk trusting in Piagetian psychology and trying "Karplusian" learning cycles. Such a common commitment is, I believe, a necessary condition for the successful functioning of a multidisciplinary program for college freshmen.

In summary, there are two necessary conditions for beginning an ADAPT-type program, a first-rate, tenured core of faculty and a common basis in a scheme for understanding student development. Are these conditions also sufficient to assure the long life of pioneer ADAPT-type programs in the frontiers of higher education? If information about ADAPT-type programs is widely shared, then in a few years perhaps an answer can be given to this question.