Educators resent 'college bashing'

By MIKE O-KEEFFE

Education-bashing has become a national fad, and campus leaders — while grateful for the attention — say they're beginning to resent it.

Since 1983 — when the Carnegie Foundation and the u.S. Dept. of Education issued separate, widely influential reports criticizing American higher education — groups, asociations, and publishers have been releasing other critiques at a dizzying rate.

The Education Commission of the States, the American Council on Education, the Holmes Group, the National Education Association, the National Council on State Legislatures, among literally dozens of others, all have contributed still more "reports" to the fad in recent months.

At the end of October, when the "Educational Excellence Network" released a report blasting American history textbooks as "dull," two books criticizing colleges more generally were on the bestseller lists.

Two weeks before that, 37 college presidents sent an"open letter" to their colleagues, asking them to champion "school reform" measures to improve teacher education.

Since 1983, reports have savaged the state of college teaching programs, college ethical instruction, student materialism, disrepair in campus research labs, administrative bureaucracies, and virtually every other aspect of American higher education.

The avalanche of reports, however, is beginning to strike some educators as excessive.

"The extent of the problem is vastly overstated," said Prof. Stephen Brookfield of Columbia University Teachers College.

"We may well need to improve," added University of California-Santa Barbara Chancellor Barbara Uehling, "but we're not in that bad a shape."

"I give colleges a good grade overall," Robert Hochstein of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching official said. "But it's a grade that could be improved."

Colleges are easy targets for criticism, Uehling noted. "There's no tangible output measures, no bottom line."

Most higher education-bashing, said the American Council on Education's Elaine El-Khawas, "has been rhetorical rather than substantive, image-creating rather than serious debate. I'm all for a higher accountability, but some of the criticisms are not of value to educators. They serve a political agenda."

Many critics, she said, have not been paying attention because most campuses already have reviewed and reformed their curricula.

"Their efforts may not have led to a best seller," El-Khawas said, referring to the success of Allan Bloom's "The Closing of the American Mind" and E.D. Hirsch's "Cultural Literacy," which argue that colleges don't teach students basic knowledge, "but there's no doubt educators have been addressing these issues."

"Some of the criticisms are unjustified," agreed Hood College President Martha Church. "We're trying to prepare students for the future, but they're making it difficult for us to do so."

Indeed, there's some evidence all the criticism is eroding public support for higher education. Media-General poll conducted in September, found a majority of Americans don't believe colleges are still a good value for the money.

Group Attitudes Corporation, a research organization, found that the number of Americans who think the overall quality of higher education in the United States is good or excellent has declined in recent years.

Such sentiments make it harder to get funding from Congress and state legislatures.

Still, the criticisms are not unwelcome on campuses. "Higher education is certainly not a basket case," said University of California at Sacramento President Donald Gerth, "but every generation we need to look at education."

"I interpret the whole atmosphere of the last five or six years as a sign of society's recognition that education is critical," observed Father William Sullivan, the president of Seattle University.

"An educated populace is buying and reading these books," Hochstein said of the recent bestsellers. "That in itself says something about the success of American higher education."

There's plenty right about American high education, others assert. "Since I left Washington in 1985," said Terrel H. Bell, President Reagan's first Secretary of Education and now a professor at the University of Utah, "I've been able to look at education quite carefully. I believe the criticism is quite healthy, but we really do have a big advantage in our outstanding higher education system."

Bell, who toured Japan, Holland, China, and other nations after leaving his Education Department post, concluded, "We're quite supreme."

"We also have a tremendous community college system that meets vocational and academic needs," Bell said. "There's opportunity for every kind of student."

As proof U.S. campuses tend to be better than their counterparts in other lands, Hochstein noted. "Foreign students flock to our campuses. We offer something special, something for everybody."

Some of those now resentful of the education-bashing contributed to it.

Hochstein's Carnegie Foundation has authored numerous reports critical of how colleges teach. Bell was officially a co-author of the 1983 "Nation At Risk" report that some say started the avalanche of criticism.

Seattle's Sullivan signed the September "open letter" to campus chiefs.

So, not surprisingly, they concede the critics have been correct about some things. "We went too far in loosening curriculum requirements," said Chancellor Robert Corrigan of the University of Massachusetts-Boston. "We need to return to a more strictly defined curriculum to avoid fractionalization."

"Students were leaving with lopsided curricula," Hood's Church said. "We need to regain some cohesiveness."

"As, we haven't paid enough attention to our schools," she maintained. "We need a dramatic intervention to set things right."

To Columbia's Brookfield, the greatest weakness is a cultural one: "America is a consensus culture, a melting pot." Reaching a consensus on the role, strengths, and weaknesses of higher education "is not important, but the debate is."

Comments argued

(Continued from Page 2)

everything you need to know about truth and wisdom is contained in a few books.

"Bloom assumes the achievements of the white, male, Western tradition are the only ones we need," Gross added. "That's racist in practice."

Nachbar agrees Bloom's arguments smack of racism and sexism, but points out that it's unintentional. His worship of Plato, Shakespeare, and Beethoven, Nachbar said, reflects a "white, male-dominated culture," not a conscious effort to exclude female and non-white male artists and philosophers.

Although Bloom decries popular culture as brain candy, Gross says rock, popular movies, and other media have value as culture and art. "Rock and roll, like Dickens, has an appeal to the masses, but it can also engage the soul on very important issues."

"The majority of rock is mindless entertainment, but the best stuff can be engaging," Gross said.

"Bruce Springsteen — on every single album there's a raw energy there as well as an extremely thoughtful introspection," Gross asserted, citing songs such as "The River," "My Father's House," and "Darkness on the Edge of Town."

"That line from 'The Riber,' 'Is a dream a lie if it don't come true,' has direct connections to the work of Langston Hughes and Ecclesiastes," Gross asserted.

Nachbar said pop artists won't replace Beethoven and Plato as cultural icons, and it's "irrelevant to analyze them in such terms, like comparing oranges and apples." Gross, however, predicts Bob Dylan and the movie "Casablanca" will be viewed reverentially by future generations.

Many of Bloom's icons, such as Shakespeare, wrote for mass audiences, Nachbar said. "In fact, he was condemned during his life by the elite because he didn't have a college education."

Force → Distance

Make It Work

DID YOU MISS the Resume Workshop? It was held on Thursday, Sept. 24. *Plan to attend the next session.* Check the "upcoming events board" next to Career Planning Office.

***

SEPTEMBER BUSINESS WEEK CAREERS magazines are in. Be sure to get your copy.

***

GRADUATE SCHOOL RECRUITERS were on campus Nov. 2. Watch the "upcoming events" board for details of future visits.

***

WAITRESSES NEEDED at Bob Melton's. Part-time hours available. If interested, call 446-8513 or stop by the Career Planning Office.

GRE AND GMAT information booklets are in for students interested in graduate school. All the information about the tests is contained in the booklet. Booklets are on the table outside the Career Planning Office.

GRE TEST DATES

December 12, 1987
February 6, 1988
April 9, 1988
June 4, 1988

GMAT TEST DATES

January 23, 1988
March 19, 1988

Office of Cooperative Education/Career Planning
Rooms 139 and 141
Office Hours 8 a.m. - 5 p.m.
Evening Hours By Appointment