

Co-referaat bij de toespraak van dr. Arnold Mitchem

President of the Council of Opportunity in the United States, ter gelegenheid van de publicatie van het advies van de Onderwijsraad.

“De helft van Nederland hoogopgeleid”, 1 december 2005, door Pim Breebaart.

It is a great pleasure meeting you again Dr. Mitchem. I am very much inspired by your words and I think your message is a support for the way we are dealing with our assignment. It was six years ago that we invited you at The Hague University/Haagse Hogeschool and I remember that you brought us a very interesting and inspiring analysis of the position of students from low-income families or from families where neither parent has graduated from college. You told us about the TRIO-programs and we decided to go to the United States to see what elements of those programs could be used in The Hague. Teachers, directors of studies and one of the members of the Board visited the UCLA, in particular the AAP talent program of that University. Every year members of my staff visit the UCLA and your TRIO Conference. AAP and TRIO staff members are our regular guests nowadays. They give inspiring lectures and we exchange ideas about how to deal with the hidden talents of the so called first-generation-students.

The Hague University is a big-city university of professional education with 30% students from ethnic minority groups. Most of them are first generation students: their parents have no experience with higher education. However, those students are not only to be found in the ethnic minority groups: we also enrol a lot of first generation students from originally Dutch families. In our institution we don't like to talk about problems too long: we prefer to work on solutions! So we have designed a successful talent-development program that is in progress for 2 years now. I'll tell you in short about the four steps we have taken so far.

A very important element in our talent-development program is the mentoring of upper grade general and vocational secondary school pupils by our students. Those students are selected and trained in coaching. The purpose of the mentoring is to stimulate the pupils to choose for higher education. “You can do it”, “You are talented, use your talent”, “Dream big, reach high”. These are the slogans we use with those 16 and 17 years old pupils. But even if that message is received, there still remain a lot of challenges before they can graduate. Our statistics show that students with a migrant background more often make wrong choices than other students. Many parents have difficulties in helping their children to make adequate choices. So student mentors are also trained in helping these pupils to recognise their strengths in order to choose the right study.

The second step is helping the students in their first year of study. We loose about 30% of our students in the first year and in the group of the first-generation-students even more. Every first year student has moments of doubt about his life and his study and not every parent or other member of the family is capable of dealing with those problems. That is why we also started a student tutor program

in The Hague University. First generation students get a fourth-year-student to tutor him or her.

The third important step is to assist students in finding an internship. In all our professional education programs internships form an integral part of the study. We assigned that task to our internship coordinators and we do a lot of networking during which we seek for opportunities to point out the importance of everyone's responsibility. In particular we are busy to interest our graduated students to find internships and coach students in the companies and institutions where they are employed.

Last but not least we do have a fourth challenge: to find employment for our graduates. So far we developed a set of measures to cope with the first three possible barriers for first generation students and we now focus on the fourth. We would like to have a system in which experienced businessmen, entrepreneurs and managers in institutions will be the coaches of our almost graduated students who are looking for a job.

In summary: our first challenge is the enrolment in higher education; the second is to survive the first year of study, the third to find an internship and the fourth to find jobs on the right level. In short this is what we have done until now with some of the best practices from the UCLA and TRIO Programs. In doing so some questions raised and at least two of those questions may be of relevance this afternoon.

We think we developed an interesting program and we try to do everything that is needed to educate more students on a higher education level. But how do we really know that we are successful? And if we think we are, is the success caused by our actions or is it just a normal autonomous development? What is the most critical factor for first generation students to succeed in our University? Is it the help we give the student, is it the technical support, or is it the hospitality of the University, of the staff, of the fellow students? So the first question is: how can we measure the results in a fair way?

The second question is far more difficult to answer: why are we wasting a lot of talent instead of developing it? Apparently this question it is not related to the way our University deals with its assignment but it concerns the closed Dutch educational system. Dr. Mitchem stated earlier that the system is less flexible than the US system and I agree. If we really want to realise the Bologna demands, it is absolutely necessary to break down the barriers in that closed system. We should start in our primary education. A lot of talented children strand at the CITO assessment procedures and the advisory system that is based upon it. They can only enrol at schools for pre-vocational education and many of those schools offer narrow programs. Not enough pupils will go on to the higher levels of that kind of education and visit the 3 or 4 year programs of a school for upper secondary vocational education. And our educational system does not really encourage those children taking the next step so only diehards will enrol at a University for

professional education. At that stage we do our best to develop the incoming talents but we work at the end of the pipeline. In between there are a lot of traps for too many children!

I'm very pleased that The Education Council of The Netherlands presents two very important reports on this subject this afternoon. In my view, ladies and gentlemen, they hold a big challenge for a lot of policy-makers and directors of educational institutions.

Thank you very much for your attention.