THE PLAY OF EDUCATION: VOLUNTEER TEACHERS IN EXPERIMENTAL UNIVERSITY CLASSES

Helga E. Kaplan
Donald M. Hassler

ABSTRACT: This paper describes an Experimental academic program at Kent State University in which a volunteer, nonprofessional mode of teaching seems to have produced positive results. The phenomenon of volunteerism is puzzling, but the data collected from this Experimental program suggest that people like to teach and do it well when they are part of a "divergent" system of openness and continued growth. In any case, this program's idealistic objectives of self-directed learning and a strong sense of community have been implemented by using volunteers.

But yield who will to their separation,
My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight.

Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future's sakes.

Robert Frost, "Two Tramps in Mudtime"

... the slenderest knowledge that may be obtained of the highest things is more desirable than the most certain knowledge obtained of lesser things.

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*

Ms. Kaplan is Assistant Director or the Experimental Programs Division, and Dr. Hassler is the Director of the Experimental Programs Division at Kent State University, Kent, Ohio 44240.
We have worked for several years as administrators in an academic program in which the teachers are not paid, in which there are very few obvious means for quality control, and in which strictly professional motivations are minimal. Yet the teaching seems to have flourished, and the student satisfaction seems to be very high (see Hassler & Kaplan, 1977). We continually wonder why such apparent success in teaching and learning can come by such indirect means, and this essay is an attempt to speculate on that puzzle. We will conclude, in fact, that not only has this academic program barely survived but that, quite to the contrary, this volunteer, nonprofessional way of teaching seems actually to represent a positive approach. Our methods involve an attempt to determine personal characteristics and to poll attitudes, but necessarily our method will be speculative as well. We do not understand finally, and we are intrigued by, a very puzzling phenomenon.

Nowhere in our reading of the literature on modern higher education have we come across a program that uses volunteers to the extent that we do, but we have read some provocative discussion about changes and about paradoxes in recent higher education in this country that can serve to introduce the description of our own program that seems to us so paradoxical. Most notably, Lewis Mayhew's recent extended survey of the nontraditional movement in American higher education of the last decade or so carries throughout the leitmotif of the role of idealism (1977). He writes generally, "Much of what takes place in formal higher education relies on faith that what is done is somehow good and worth while" (1977, p. 47). More specifically, he describes well the motivational drive behind the "free university" phenomenon:

The free university concept caught hold for a few years [in the seventies], providing a structure in which anyone wishing to teach something could do so if there were those who wished to learn. Course offerings needed no judicial review nor quality control. Quality was assured if faculty and students were both interested and working at the same thing (Mayhew, 1977, pp. 44–45).

Our program, which we shall describe, resembles this notion of the free university; but at the same time our program has from its inception been a part of the regular structure of Kent State University.

Later in his book Mayhew discusses the basic premise that underlies recent arguments for placing emphasis on the learner rather than the teacher: "Learning must ultimately be accomplished by the learner, regardless of ability, and . . . if learning is to continue throughout life,