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Reprinted from the *Journal of Negro Education*, July, 1936

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# Avenues of Redirection in Vocational Education

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Much has been said in the last few years regarding the general inadequacy of programs of education to meet the needs of a complex and ever changing social order. This inadequacy has been brought so sharply into focus as a result of the depression that we are apt to lose sight of the fact that the whole educational system in all its vastness has been the product of but a few years of groping effort, which in its original design had few implications in the direction of economic adjustment. The rapidly developing emphasis on the economic approach to social adjustment has of necessity entailed demands upon education. To meet these demands a shift in educational aims and ideals, in keeping with desired outcome, has been inevitable.

Negro education, satisfied at first to keep abreast with the general evolutionary development of education, has come to recognize an additional obligation, namely, that of satisfying the economic approach to social adjustment in a manner that must recognize to some extent at least the limitations which are placed upon Negroes as they seek to enter fields of employment; it being evident that these limitations are more real than imaginary and must be dealt with accordingly. Observation of employment tendencies and an effort to evaluate the available material on the adequacy of progress of vocational education furnish the

basis for the suggestions made in this article.

As a part of the question—"Does education need reorganization and redirection?"—is the question also—"If there is a swing in the direction of increased emphasis of a technical program, how adequate is the technical program as now administered to meet the situation?" The several occupational and vocational conferences as well as the articles published on the subject are rather uniform in citing the inadequacy of programs of technical education up to date. These programs have been held inadequate both from the angles of scope and effectiveness of administration. It is the purpose of this article to suggest ways of increasing the scope of these programs, along with brief suggestions regarding means of making the courses now offered more effective. It goes without saying that there is presupposed a change of attitude on the part of administrators which will enable them to regard their vocational offerings as being an end within themselves, so far as the educational program is concerned, and in doing this will connote to them parity with non-vocational offerings; the term non-vocational being used in a limited sense.

One is struck by the meagerness of the information regarding social and

economic status as well as the scarcity of other authentic and worthwhile data on Negroes employed in agriculture, transportation and service occupations. How much money, for example, is made by the waiters in hotels and on dining cars? What becomes of this income? How can it, in view of credit unions, cooperatives, and other avenues of rational investment, be harnessed for more effective amassing of wealth? It would seem that social and economic studies might perceptibly enhance their effectiveness if directed in the interest of such groups and the information gained be made the basis of training programs and extension teaching. There is reason to believe that large sums in the form of wages and emoluments enter our various employment groups which are unaccounted for.

A program of practical economics for service employees is but one of a number of the lines of effort looking to the conservation of wealth. At the present time when there is so little opportunity to use economics as it involves high finances, it would seem that a larger field of usefulness is to be found in connection with the study of the economy of those occupations involving large employment groups of Negroes, such as railroad and hotel employees. Such studies should be used as the basis for a program intended to direct into more useful channels the money which these groups probably spend unintelligently, if not wastefully. Such studies should be valuable in attempts to organize these groups into consumer and producer cooperatives, as among the worthy projects that would harness this large purchasing power and render it effective as a

means of creating additional employment.

The census report for 1932 shows that 28 per cent of employable Negroes are engaged in personal and domestic service. These people usually enter these jobs not because of special fitness, but because of lack of preparation for higher callings along with the fact that restricted opportunity in unskilled labor fields leaves them little choice otherwise. Thus, the workers of this class may be represented by any conceivable type, both mentally and physically. With no uniformity of type and no sense of class status they represent a large unorganized body of wage earners, largely neglected, frequently exploited, and mostly without hope. The inability of many of this group to cope with the demands now made in these fields, along with the effects of the depression, is resulting in the dropping of some with the replacement of others. This has reached the alarming figure of 13,600 porters and 81,000 unemployed women servants in twelve large cities.<sup>1</sup> Is this not too large a group who have constituted a large portion of our employable people not to be given consideration as to ways and means in which they can have a better claim on their jobs?

The writer does not share the view that special curricula intended to train for domestic service as a part of the regular program is advisable, not at least as the initial step. There is ample evidence to show that students are unwilling to enroll regularly for such work, though they may as a matter of necessity gravitate into these jobs. A more fertile field would seem to be in

<sup>1</sup> Mary Anderson, *JOURNAL OF NEGRO EDUCATION*, Ja, 1936, p. 68.

the establishment of short courses, either at the institutions if located in cities or as extension schools, to which maids and cooks now in service would be invited to attend with the cooperation of their employers. Such an opportunity should be welcomed by both employer and employee, and would prove a boon to this service. If the necessity for this type of effort could be justified, it is probable that graduates of home economics could be established in the larger cities to conduct these schools and to serve as employment agents and domestic service counselors. In doing this there would be created a wholesome and much needed service into which our college graduates in home economics could be directed. A plan could, conceivably, be worked out whereby a small fee paid by the employer or employee would largely subsidize this service. The fundamental instruction given in personal hygiene, sanitation, child care, care of household appliances, menu making, food preparation and service would more than justify a nominal fee.

The work of building superintendents offers to the average vocational school a field that should be of wide usefulness. The advances made in heating, air conditioning, ventilation and cleaning demand of those charged with the care of buildings an understanding of these devices and techniques. Why shouldn't vocational institutions be of service then in getting this information across? Admittedly they are to some extent, but this is in no sense as general as it should be.

Courses now offered such as tailoring, shoe repairing, carpentry, brick-masonry, etc., should be brought up to date and made more effective as train-

ing to those who would become contractors and business owners! The general lack of appreciation of fundamental business procedures indicates the need to add such training in these fields. Where single occupations such as shoe repairing offer little by themselves, those taking such courses should be taught related trades such as hat blocking, and encouraged to add to their businesses such adjuncts as shoe-shining parlors to round out the development.

With tailoring the cleaning and pressing end is an important adjunct to the small enterprise. This work, with the modern machinery necessary and the chemistry of spotting, now requires definite training which should become a part of instruction in tailoring as should salesmanship and business methods, including simple accounting.

A careful study of all trade fields should reveal similar possibilities. Experience has shown that those who enter the specialized branches of agriculture such as poultry husbandry and horticulture must be armed with a variety of supporting information, such as an elementary understanding of concrete and wood-work. The man with small capital who must depend on artisans in all of the specialized fields to satisfy his lay-out requirements usually goes without these services and is handicapped from the start. Even if he is able to purchase them, this basic knowledge would be required to protect his interests.

A field of very definite promise for a not too limited number of well-trained men is that of landscape architecture. With increased leisure and a growing appreciation of beauty, this work

when combined with general caretaking of estates and a small greenhouse and nursery business, offers a lucrative and most satisfactory status of employment. Every city of any size would easily accommodate two such well trained individuals. The condition of many school campuses indicates that they themselves might with profit secure such services. Experience indicates that these institutions are amenable to cooperative schemes which would allow them to receive in return for housing and boarding facilities landscape services in repayment. The development of such arrangements and the ferreting out of worth while possibilities in the various vocational fields depend so thoroughly upon vision and initiative that it does not seem amiss here to suggest that a part of the redirection process should include the selection of competent instructors and preferably those who have proven themselves in practical employment aside from the scholastic attainments. In the vernacular of the agriculturalist, the breed and strain are important but do not take precedence over the record of performance. This should apply with equal logic to the instructor. The man who knows field conditions and who has demonstrated their possibilities must know more than text-book conditions. Such a one imparts his vision to his students and establishes the psychological attitude of practical achievement.

In brief, institutions offering this work looking to the establishment of their graduates as entrepreneurs must by careful study of field conditions keep their programs adjusted to actual conditions.

In spite of mass production and big

businesses, there are a sufficient number of successful small enterprises to indicate that those properly trained in resourcefulness, as well as technical ability, still have a chance. Admittedly there are many difficulties which face Negroes who attempt to establish themselves in businesses. That these difficulties are not insurmountable is attested to by the fact that Orientals (Chinese and Japanese) in this country who numbering 213,000 or 2.5 per cent of the Negro population do 88 per cent of the net retail business and have 98 per cent as much stock on hand at the end of the year. These Orientals are low-income groups and have suffered little less discrimination than American Negroes. The wealth amassed by Negroes amounting to \$300,000,000 in church property, \$1,062,536,439 in farm property and buildings, as compared to \$101,146,000 in retail businesses indicates more than anything else the need for redirection in vocational offerings and a corresponding alignment in attitude.

An effort to give cognizance to increased development of vocational programs should give specific attention to ways and means of establishing graduates of the programs upon finishing their courses of instruction, such studies being incident to any satisfactory program of placement. The attention now being given in this country, and in the world at large, to cooperative programs suggests that this line of effort should be given consideration in schools offering vocational training. This is especially important in view of the possibilities which cooperative effort offers to low-income groups in the establishment of small enterprises.

Where these cooperatives have gained a foothold they seem to offer limitless possibilities for employment as well as advantages for the consumer. The efforts now being made in this direction by Negro groups are worthy of encouragement and careful study.

These suggestions are proffered on the assumption that we must sooner or later realize, with the help of vocational guidance programs, a redistribution of our student population is necessary. Though it should be distinctly understood that no marked over-night change in this direction is to be expected and that with respect to certain menial occupations our success in interesting high school and college graduates in them will depend on our ability to work out supervisory relations such as now obtain in extension instruction and supervision in certain fields. In other instances the gradual introduction of trained and highly-skilled personnel should result in an improved economic and social status in these occupations and prove an effective means of working into higher levels of the same fields. There must also be a discouragement of the inferiority status usually ascribed to occupations in which Negroes are given preference. If for any reason Negroes are able to man more successfully certain occupations than other groups in the face of wholesale unemployment, it is difficult to see how that can be a weakness. If, for example, Negroes are preferable in the Pullman service because of their politeness and geniality, it is difficult to see how this can be ascribed entirely or even partially to qualities derogatory to the Negro race. An innate quality of friendliness and good taste should be capitalized. The

difference is largely one of terminology between a squeamish little "Frog" cook and a temperamental French chef. These points are stated lest we get the panacea idea that the mere establishment of new lines of effort will be all that is required in the solution of the problem.

The avenues listed are not new, or at least not entirely so, it is realized, but it is believed that they are not in general use, whereas it is felt that they can be made effective in every institution offering vocational and technical work. Another justification for these additional offerings of an intensely practical nature, quite aside from their benefit to those trained, will be the salutary effect on the establishment of these institutions as potent influences in the areas which they serve. It is hardly necessary to emphasize the value of having both large and small employers regard these institutions as sources of tangible aid to the proper conduct of their businesses.

Further admitting that nothing revolutionary has been set out here, it seems necessary again to emphasize the importance of attitude and the general tightening up of the programs looking to the basic adjustment of the masses of Negroes. This process, which will bring the Negro into favorable position as a competitor, will work for improvement in two distinct ways. First, out of the general effort to intellectualize the so-called menial occupations will come the development of an improved employment status. This status will form the basis for organization and serve to promote leadership as well as group thought and action. Secondly, there inevitably results from the general building up of occupations



the need for specialists and administrators, thereby creating higher brackets of employment, in these fields to which our programs for training may be directed.

Although employment tendencies at the present time must be considered in the light of the severity of economic pressure, the general change even during so-called normal times has been in the direction of increased competition for all jobs to which Negroes have had a ready access. This has been inevitable with the general increase in population and the rapid destruction of the frontiers of natural resources. The extent to which this is operating at present is amply indicated in statistics which show the percentages of Negroes employed in relation to the total employed population in contrast with his percentage of those on relief throughout the nation. The degree to which this tendency is offset by new avenues or opportunities for employment is negligible—such instances being few and frequently of peculiar origin. This indicates the need for a primary effort to stop further inroads on avenues of traditional employment. In so doing it is probable that some of the losses sustained may be regained. This would likely be true wherever training would establish the Negro's fitness beyond question. This shades into the second point discussed, which is the adequacy of the progress being made generally in instruction in vocations. It seems that the first extensive effort to offer vocational education, with the exceptions of Hampton and Tuskegee Institutes, was in the establishment of the Negro land grant colleges. The statement already made that the programs of these institutions have been

inadequate as to scope and effectiveness of administration is explained by the abruptness with which such programs were started. For the most part they sprang suddenly into being with the passage of the second Morrill Act in order that states with a dual system of education could comply with the federal provisions for the disbursement of funds. Coincident with this was the general lack of appreciation of the value of a thorough going program of vocational education by the administrative officials of the institutions themselves. In competition with private colleges which have enrolled the bulk of Negro college students and which have specialized in the classics, the land grant colleges felt little occasion to become other than classical schools themselves, the gestures made in the direction of a technical program being largely to satisfy legal requirements. These institutions have also had the additional handicap of having to use their technical facilities and personnel to satisfy their physical needs or for "production," because of limited funds. This continues to be a difficult problem to these institutions and must be relegated to a less important position if these institutions are to cope with the urgent demands made by the technical requirements of their vocational programs.

It is also realized that in an effort to establish parity between vocational and non-vocational offerings care must be used to see that the subjects for which college credit is given represents in content and scope material which merits consideration. Just as the rather general establishment of elementary and secondary schools has

relieved many of the higher institutions of learning of the necessity for providing for instruction on these lower levels, the more general provision of vocational high schools will permit the technical colleges to give their attention to the advanced technical fields, and thereby avoid the present vitiation of standards.

It seems safe to say that we shall not begin to comply with present-day needs until those institutions charged with the administration of vocational programs undergo vigorous reorganization. This will involve a realignment of offerings with present-day needs, not merely in the nature of additional offerings, but will also involve a reorganization of present curricula to

insure the preparation of adequately-trained individuals to meet all phases of vocational and indeed social requirements of successful living. There should likewise be improvement in the facilities for instruction, with a greater devotion of these facilities to the primary objective of instruction; and the selection of a vigorous, practically as well as theoretically trained personnel. Any effort less thorough than this will be inadequate to meet the issue which requires leaving the beaten path and denying credence to the statement that, "At present it would appear that, for good or for ill, changes in Negro education can as a rule be brought about only as they are realized in white education."