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Innovation at the University of Dayton

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DAYTON, Ohio, March 1, 1972 --- Innovation is the up-and-coming word in education today. But it isn't a word to be taken lightly for it should bring with it responsibility.

It often confuses those outside of education and many inside question its relevance. Therefore, it has become a controversial issue in our society of today.

Eight months ago the University of Dayton addressed itself to the question by adding the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies and placing it under the Assistant Provost's office. Mr. James (Jack) Nesmith, whose background has involved the study of educational innovation for the past 17 years, was named Assistant Provost at the same time with the responsibility of studying innovative education and where it should fit in gracefully with the University's operation.

Mr. Nesmith recently discussed this innovation, what it means to him, to higher education and to UD. Here in part are some of his comments.

"Efforts began more than two years ago to establish some kind of a center on the University of Dayton campus to give primary attention to innovative education developments and particularly to interdisciplinary studies," he said. "Interdisciplinary studies are a well-recognized means of re-aligning University resources of talent, facilities, intelligence, and skills in such a way that attention can be given to major problems in a rapidly-changing society.....

"It was soon recognized, however, that interdisciplinary studies alone are not enough. There had to be a broader attention given to the whole gamut of innovative development--a whole new range of efforts to speak to the newly-emerged and newly-identified needs of society. Attention gradually became focused on what came to be called the Office of the Assistant Provost...

"Because of the urgency of the problems and crises in our society," he continued, "a great deal of emphasis is noted in all educational circles on 'innovation.' Most simply it means the 'new'--the new departure, the new effort, the experimental, the alternative approach to educational and social problems...

"Innovation in my own mind means new efforts to speak more effectively to the newly emerged and newly identified needs of society... The question is sometimes raised whether innovations are not overplayed and perhaps too much attention given to current affairs at the expense of tradition.

"To the extent that such an emphasis undercuts proper balance of concern for the traditional and the cultural heritage, then innovation does run the hazard of being overplayed. However, the weight of the argument is on the side of innovation," he observed. "It is the range of problems which are not being dealt with which are the critical areas for our times.

"Moreover, it remains a fact that institutions being what they are, conventional ways of proceeding have an inertial and a continuity of their own. There is little

danger that this continuity will be radically broken. More important is the real problem of the distribution of time. Everyone's time is limited, especially the student's. How much time can be given to the grand tradition and still have time left for the critical issues of the day, much less to preparation for a future which if anything will be more hazardous than our own times?.....

"One of the responses of institutions to this whole gamut of problems and also to the demands of students is to grant still wider and wider blocks of time for students to do their own thing," he feels. "In a way, the burden of proof is increasingly falling on the student. The more options the University offers, the more the student will have to assume responsibility for his choices.

"But this is taken as a healthy rather than an unhealthy sign. Clearly citizens of the future will have to be even more responsible and more conscientious about their choices than even our generation has been. The upshot of the current emphasis on innovation and on increasing the options available to students is the hope that the experience will contribute to the student's growth of character and stature so that he can indeed assume responsibility for his choice, and that the choices he makes will prepare him for living in the kind of world he must be prepared for," he concluded.