

Ars Gratia . . .

By ROGER EBERT

Well, at least diplomas aren't IBM cards—yet

We suppose this will be disturbing news for people who make their bread and butter peddling Thinking Machines to universities.

But a famous educator has gone and said it:

Our red-tape riddled colleges may be killing education.

The warning comes from Prof. Oscar Handlin, Harvard's Pulitzer Prize-winning historian.

And he lays the blame for the "time-encrusted mechanism" of American colleges squarely at the feet of administrators who respect The Curve — and machine-made grade averages — more than they do the individual and his creative mind.

Handlin charges that our colleges are causing a "tragic waste of talent." And we agree with him. While he writes of no particular school, a college like Illinois or Michigan State or California could not have been far from his mind.

For it is the financially sound, bed-rock education machine of the vast state university that is most often guilty of forcing students to surrender to the commonplace.

And we suggest that the failures are most common among those students who get the best grades, the highest honors, and the most lucrative job offers. Why are they "failures?" Because they have been forced to "succeed" in a system of trivia, vulgarity and aimlessness.

They have received good grades — of course. As Handlin writes: "Their generation has been so thoroughly harnessed to the treadmill of examinations that it accepts its servitude as a normal if strenuous condition of life." Good grades have become habit, not accomplishment. They know that if they ingest a given amount of fact, convert it to True and False, and spread it cleverly upon an examination paper, they will be placed high on The Curve.

Perhaps, in their success with The Curve, they forget that Life is not graded on a scale. Their standard of excellence has been replaced with a shifting, comparative substitute that really proves only one thing: some students are not as bad as other students.

The scale, of course, is often carried to ludicrous extremes. The relative, inexact comparisons of one student to another are translated into decimal points and fed to machines. And then students are expelled from school on the strength of these decimal points, carried to two places and official-looking, but actually founded on a quicksand of injustice.

The "good" students who are ruined by conformance to The Curve are only one part of the "wasted talent" listed by Handlin.

The other waste is of the disillusioned, the idealistic, who are tempted to turn their backs on the entire educational process. Handlin writes: ". . . they were good when they got to college (otherwise they would not have been admitted), and the failure is not altogether theirs."

Students who refuse to buckle beneath the pressure of the system are not doomed to lifetimes as pariahs, however. As Handlin points out, they often become the true creators in our society. They are the Einsteins, the Schweitzers, the Faulkners and the Frosts, who remain honest and far-seeing in the midst of the superficial.

As we suggested in a previous column,

it is hard to see how the present undergraduate educational policies of this University — and almost all others — can produce the original thinkers our society is starving for. We are told that lecture classes of 250 members are simply too big to make essay examinations "practical." We are told that multiple-choice exams, and their supporting brigades of IBM machines, are the only "answer."

We can only wonder if the classes are also growing too big to make education "practical."

There may be some hope, however. We were encouraged by a recent article by Benjamin Fine, former education editor of The New York Times. He told of an eastern school that plans to reserve 10 per cent of its entering class for "gifted, but below-average gradewise" students. The experiment may produce startling results.

And in the meantime, as we struggle in a maze of dotted lines and doggedly try to place our electronic "X" in the proper square, we will try not to worry that the World and its reality may be preparing a True and False examination on American education.

Because . . .

You know what the answer would be.