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Report on the Landmark Forum

The following report represents my own professional opinions and does not in any way reflect the views of any university or organization with which I am or have been associated. I am not submitting this report as a representative of any organization.

I received my doctorate in clinical psychology from the Pennsylvania State University in 1957. My experience includes: 30 years as a professor of psychology and 18 years as department head at the University of Alabama; 2 years as department head at the University of Tennessee; 30 years teaching psychotherapy and psychological assessment and a similar period as a consultant and expert witness on psychological and management matters. For the past 10 years I have been the Executive Vice President and Chief Executive Officer of the American Psychological Association. I am a Fellow of the American Psychological Association, the Division of Psychotherapy and the Society for Personality Assessment. I am past president of the Alabama, Southeastern and American Psychological Associations. I hold Psychology license #4 in the State of Alabama.

At the request of the Landmark Education Corporation, I undertook an evaluation of the effectiveness, safety and appropriateness of the procedures followed in conducting the Landmark Forum program. As background for my evaluation, I attended the Landmark Forum on May 7, 8, 9 and 11th, 1999. In addition, I reviewed all of the materials used to screen participants, including the extensive application form which Landmark requires all participants to complete; the Policies and Procedures followed by staff in conducting the program; and the forms used to obtain information from health care professionals when such information is needed.

The report is in the form of several questions that might be raised about the Landmark Forum, followed by answers that reflect my experience and my professional opinion.

Is the Landmark Forum harmful? I saw nothing in the Landmark Forum I attended to suggest that it would be harmful to any participant. The program is designed for reasonably healthy and effectively functioning individuals and participants are carefully screened to assure that they are appropriate for the program. The Leader was pleasant and professional in his interactions with participants. At no time was he judgmental or hostile to any participant. On the contrary, he was sensitive and adept in handling the reactions of the participants to topics under discussion. Since some participants were frankly discussing unhappy or unsuccessful life experiences such as painful experiences or troubled relationships, some people expressed sadness, and there were some tears, but these were handled well by the leader, and there were no incidents of disruptive or dysfunctional emotionality.

Participants were informed that leaving the program at times other than scheduled breaks or otherwise missing parts of the seminar would detract from the experience, but there was no coercion to remain in the room, and it was not unusual for participants to leave and return. Participants were not pressed to give personal information, and some chose to speak rarely if at all, apparently preferring to listen and observe.

My informal observations of participants during the sessions and in informal conversations during breaks suggested to me that people felt interested and relaxed and challenged to think deeply about themselves. I did not experience any personal sense of harm, danger,

threat, or intimidation at any time, and I saw no evidence that anyone else did. In my opinion, there was nothing in the Landmark Forum program I attended either in its content or the way in which it was conducted, that could be considered as harmful to participants.

Many participants expressed the feeling that participation in the program had been beneficial to them in understanding themselves and their relationships. Some participants, who had attended other Landmark Forum programs in the past, said that their lives had been improved by the experience, and many new participants came because friends and relatives had told them that it had been a beneficial experience for them.

Is the Landmark Education Corporation's policy and application of screening appropriate and sufficient? The Landmark Forum is designed for people who are mentally and physically reasonably healthy and who are handling their life situations effectively. The screening procedures are designed to prevent the participation of individuals whose coping skills are compromised by mental or physical illness or other causes. The screening procedures, which are extensive, range from a self-report questionnaire, through telephone interviews to face-to-face interviews with the Program Leader.

Application Questionnaire. The application questionnaire clearly informs potential participants that the Landmark Forum is intended for people who are well, that it is not intended as therapy or treatment for any disorder and that participants are responsible for determining whether they are physically, mentally or emotionally prepared for the experience. Individuals with a history of mental illness or severe emotional problems are instructed to consult with a mental health professional about their ability to handle stress. Those who have questions about their ability to handle stress are recommended not to participate in the program.

In addition to standard identifying data, the questionnaire requires the participant to describe any past or present mental health problems and hospitalization, treatment or medication for mental or emotional problems.

Screening Procedures. Any answers on the application form that suggest any current or past mental or emotional problems are the subject of a telephone interview by a staff member. For each of the questions involving mental health issues, the manual used by the staff includes highly detailed instructions for handling answers that might be given by the applicant. Any response indicating that the applicant has experienced mental health problems in the past or present triggers very specific questions on the part of the interviewer. If an individual has had difficulties and/or treatment in the past and is currently experiencing difficulties, or if the applicant is taking psychoactive medications, the interviewer calls back for a second interview and recommends against participation in the Landmark Forum. Those who insist on participating despite the recommendation are required to get a signed consent from a licensed mental health professional. Landmark Forum staff members do not give medical or mental health advice to participants or prospective participants: staff members who do screening base their statements and questions on the advice of appropriate professionals and on the manuals developed with professional consultation.

Applicants not screened out by the above procedures are asked to inform the Landmark Forum of any changes in their mental and emotional condition. Staff members are provided with detailed procedures for handling any atypical events that might occur during the program, such as a sudden illness, although such events are apparently extremely rare.

Program leaders, who are well trained and highly experienced, provide the final level of screening. If there is doubt on the part of any staff member about the appropriateness of an applicant to participate, if the applicant has been approved on a legal waiver or if any

applicant or participant exhibits behavior that raises questions about her/his emotional well being, the Program Leader is authorized to interview and, if necessary, reject the applicant as a participant.

In my opinion, the application form is well designed to inform applicants of the nature of the program and the requirements and responsibilities of a participant. The screening questions are well crafted to identify mental and emotional problems or other disqualifying conditions. Of necessity, the application form depends upon honest answers from the applicant. Although individuals who fail to disclose relevant information could pass through the screen, they would have to do so knowingly and would have to falsely sign an informed consent form stating that all of their responses were accurate and true.

The instructions to staff for telephone screening are very elaborate and thorough. Although some judgement is required on the part of the interviewer (judging the applicant's current effectiveness in dealing with life) most of the decisions are precisely programmed by the instructions and require little or no judgement on the part of the interviewer, and certainly no diagnostic skills or training. Again, assuming reasonable honesty on the part of the applicant, I believe the probability is very high that the existing procedures are appropriate and sufficient to screen out applicants who should not participate.

Is the Landmark Forum a form of psychotherapy? Does it use the techniques of psychotherapy? Do Landmark Forum Leaders need to be trained, licensed mental health professionals?

It is clear from the stated goals of the program and from my observations of how it operates that the Landmark Forum is nothing like psychotherapy. In my 40 years as a psychologist, I have studied psychotherapy extensively, have taught and supervised hundreds of students, and I am a Fellow of several organizations on psychotherapy. I consider myself very experienced in understanding what psychotherapy is about. What I experienced and observed at the Landmark Forum I attended was nothing remotely like psychotherapy as I know it. In general, I would consider the content of the program to be philosophical rather than psychological in nature: participants are challenged to examine their ways of thinking much as they might be in a philosophy course. Language, relationships and communication patterns are examined from that frame of reference and not from the point of view of psychopathology or mental dysfunction.

Landmark Forum leaders are not, and do not need to be, psychotherapists or psychologists, and the program could in no sense be regarded as psychotherapy or as a part of the discipline of psychology. What the leaders are doing in their interactions with participants is more closely akin to the kind of sensitivity training given to educators and Peace Corps volunteers to help them become more aware of how they interact with others. It was not much different in depth, intensity and self-disclosure than the conversations among close friends or family members might be. The intense relationships that often develop as a part of psychotherapy (sometimes referred to as <u>transference</u>) were nowhere in evidence, and there hardly could have been in such a large group with such distant and brief interactions with the leader.

It would be inappropriate and inaccurate to identify the Landmark Forum program as a form of psychotherapy. Individuals in psychotherapy might find the Landmark Forum experience interesting and stimulating, but it would hardly cover the issues typical in psychotherapy. Since the Landmark Forum was neither designed nor intended to be psychotherapeutic in nature, and participants are clearly informed of that at the onset, individuals in need of psychotherapy should not expect to obtain psychotherapeutic benefits as a result of participating in the Landmark Forum. No one seeking psychotherapy should expect to find it in a Landmark Forum.

Psychotherapists and Landmark Forum leaders are different in training, orientation, techniques and skills. I suspect that some psychotherapists would, with appropriate training, make good Landmark Forum leaders and that some Landmark Forum leaders would, with proper education and training, make good psychotherapists, but neither needs the training or skills of the other to do their respective jobs. Since mentally ill and emotionally disturbed individuals are screened out of Landmark Forum programs and since the techniques of Landmark Forum leaders are not those that would be likely to assist the mentally ill, I can see no reason for Landmark Forum Leaders to be licensed mental health professionals.

Is the Landmark Forum or the organization that delivers it, Landmark Education Corporation, a cult or anything like a cult? Are people at risk of "brain washing", "mind control", "thought reform", or other forms of manipulation?

The Landmark Forum has none of the characteristics typical of a cult. Most cults have a charismatic leader or leaders who maintain, with their members, a strong relationship over a prolonged time period. Cult members become very emotionally attached to their leaders, even if they do not come in close contact with them. They are encouraged to follow the instructions of the cult leader and to devote significant amounts of their time and resources to activities directed by the cult leader. Typically, cult members remove themselves from their families and usual environments and undergo periods of social isolation, peer pressure to conform, and significant modification of their behavior, lifestyle, dress, food and relationships. None of these characteristics are even possible in the relatively brief encounters that take place at a Landmark Forum; the level of intensity and duration are not sufficient to encourage the intense, addiction-like behavior said to be exhibited by cult members.

In my opinion, "brain washing", "mind control" or "thought reform" are very dubious concepts. There is little evidence to support that they ever take place except in situations in which extreme coercive pressure is put on a vulnerable person in circumstances of isolation, deprivation, and mistreatment such as a prisoner of war situation. The relatively brief encounters in a pleasant environment that characterize the Landmark Forum program could never effect such extreme and unwanted changes in personality and behavior as those attributed to the various forms of "mind control".

In my opinion, the Landmark Forum does not place individuals at risk of any form of "mind control" "brainwashing" or "thought control."

In my opinion, the Landmark Forum is not a cult or anything like a cult, and I do not see how any reasonable, responsible person could say that it is.

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November 30, 1999