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HIGHER EDUCATION: ACCESS AND EXCELLENCE

Remarks of

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before

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Introduction

Daniel J. Boorstin, in his book Democracy and Its Discontents, entitled the final chapter "Getting There Is All the Fun."

That statement, a bit tongue-in-cheek perhaps, seems to capture today's higher education mood--at least in the United States. During the past 30 years we've moved from a relatively tight higher education system to what can only be described as a sprawling enterprise. It hasn't been all fun, of course, but at least we were kept very, very busy.

Now, after three decades of dramatic growth, a kind of morning-after mood has settled in. Enrollments have began to level off. Building new facilities has declined. We're "not quite sure" what has happened to something we like to describe as "academic standards."

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Early Elitist Tendencies

The truth is that students in our early colleges were nearly all children of wealth -- sons of merchants, shipbuilders, magistrates, lawyers, gentleman farmers, and, above all, ministers. Only about 10 percent came from the homes of poor farmers, servants, or seamen.

Throughout our history there were exceptions, to be sure. The church-sponsored college frequently used spiritual piety rather than intellectual prowess to measure student progress. And the land grant college dramatically linked the university to the social and economic expansion of the Nation.

However, while these two uniquely American institutions were egalitarian in their inclination, they strained, but did not break, the connection -- between social privilege and higher education.

For more than 200 years the percentage of high school graduates going on to college crept up very slowly. It reached 36 percent by 1900 and then it plateaued for over 40 years. But this 36 percent was only about 10 percent of the total age cohort. Clearly higher education in America was still the exception -- not the rule.

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Today all this has changed. We have moved from elite to universal higher education. After World War II, sparked largely by the GI bill, enrollments took a quantum leap ahead. Some 2,230,000 veterans -- many of them first generation college students -- came to campus. And from 1940 to 1960 American higher education enrollment doubled, from 1.5 to 3.2 million.

This expansion, in turn, triggered far greater growth. Now aspirations had been sparked among historically bypassed students, those who never dreamed of college. So long as higher education was restricted to the privileged few, blacks, Chicanos, and the economically deprived accepted their exclusion. But when <u>middle</u> income students marched off to college, the poor now perceived themselves as tightly and prejudicially locked out of social progress.

Langston Hughes, in his poem "Dream Deferred," asks rhetorically--

> What happens to a dream deferred?
> Does it dry up
> Like a raisin in the sun?
> Or fester like a sore . . .
> <u>Or does it explode</u>?

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During the 1960s American higher education confronted, quite literally, an explosion of rising expectations. Colleges and universities from coast to coast -- often torn between tradition, turmoil, and social conscience -- aggressively recruited minority and low income students. And higher education enrollment took another leap ahead. From 1960 to 1977 enrollment increased from 3.2 million to 11.4 million. And even more significantly, the percentage of minority students enrolled in "higher education" increased from about 7 percent to 17.5 percent in just 15 years.

Education As A Right

Higher education in America has become not just a privilege but a "right." A $6 billion student assistance program has been approved by Congress. And public policy now declares that no eligible student should be denied access to higher education because of social or economic barriers.

Since World War II the university has -- in short -- become a prime distributor of rewards and principle means by which upward mobility is achieved.

This leads me to observe that, in every advanced culture, there is a "trip-over" point -- a point where higher education is so identified with social progress and where higher education gains such momentum that not going to college becomes less and less an option because the university now gives key rewards.

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The university has always conveyed rewards, of course. It's just that, as more and more people are involved, participating in the reward is more and more essential. David Reisman and his associates observed that in America middle and lower middle class neighborhoods have been tipped in the direction of college, making it harder for the majority of young people _not_ to go to college than to _go_.

And today almost all high school graduates who want to go to college can find a place somewhere in the system. The future focus, I suspect, will be not on gaining access to the system but on gaining admission to particular programs -- to medicine or law or engineering professions where the rewards are high and where minorities and women have been underrepresented in the past.

Also, a very important pattern is beginning to emerge. We are beginning to discover that an open admissions policy does, in fact, have limits. Universal higher education is not quite universal.

The crucial point is this: even when almost all barriers are removed, a significant percentage of high school graduates will _not_ go on to traditional higher learning institutions. For the foreseeable future, at least, I believe the outer limits have been reached. The enrollment pattern among 18-21 year olds has now somewhat stabilized.

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On the other hand, adult enrollments will continue to expand. America is growing older. By the year 2000 the number of adults over 21 years of age will increase by almost 10 percent. In 1975, 17 million persons participated in adult education, 4 million more than in 1969. And I'm convinced this pattern will persist. I also suspect nontraditional institutions will continue to expand.

Today, American business and industry are spending between 40 and 50 billion dollars a year on "in-company" training. And during the next 10 years, as our youth population continues to decline, these "non-collegiate" schools may, in fact, compete with more traditional higher learning institutions.

II

Well, what are we to say about this curious, not quite universal, higher education system in America, one that serves two-thirds of all high school graduates? It's very big, of course. It's quite untidy. It struggles with competing values, just like the society it serves. And viewed from one perspective, it is a system where quality has declined.

But it's more than this of course. The open university reflects the fact that life is now more complicated, and that more education, for more people, is essential. One-hundred years ago

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universal secondary education was pushed. And today 14 or more years of formal education does not seem unreasonable for those about to enter Century 21.

The expanded university also recognizes that there is no cut off line where the gifted and non gifted are arbitrarily split apart. And it accepts the "brash assumption" that openness and excellence in higher education are, in fact, not contradictions.

In the remaining moments, I should like to pick up that final note and ask whether increased access can, in fact, lead to increased quality in academic life. Four specific propositions will be probed.

First, I believe mass higher education can sustain quality if it forces the university to confront more seriously its obligation to each student.

Quite frankly, many colleges and universities have had in the student selection process a self-fulfilling prophecy. Admissions officers were expected to recruit the gifted student, who in turn become the gifted graduate. The aim was to keep the institutional risks very, very low.

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The strategy was to recruit students who would look good at the institution, rather than finding those who could profit from further education. There is overlap, of course, but the difference in attitude is absolutely fundamental. So long as colleges depend on the selection process to screen out all but the academic winners, colleges function, as Astin suggests, much as handicappers do. They are more interested in predicting performance than in improving it.

This doesn't mean that we abolish standards. Education means evaluation. It's just that, in the past, our definition of the able student was far too limited and arbitrarily imposed.

During the 1960s the American universities were challenged, sometimes in the harshest terms, to put their own performance on the line. They were reminded that, in education, exclusion is not a symbol of success. And they were asked to measure quality, not just within the confines of the campus, but in terms of the degree to which they promote human potential in society as a whole.

This challenge introduced, I am convinced, a healthy tension in the Academy, and because of the debate I believe the academic enterprise was strengthened.

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III

This leads me quickly to Proposition #2. I believe mass higher education can be excellent if a clear cut division of labor is established. Let me put the issue a pointedly as I can. As higher education enrollments are expanded, traditional arts and science colleges and research universities cannot exclusively do the job.

In fact, to expand endlessly the traditional university will be harmful both to students and to the institutions. What we need, in short, is a diversity of institutions to serve a diversity of students. In America, from 1960 to 1970, some 550 new institutions were established. Most of this growth was at the 2-year college level.

During the decade of the 60s one new community college was built in America every 12 days.

Marty Trow, in his brilliant essay entitled The Transition from Mass to Universal Higher Education, argues that the so-called autonomous functions of the university -- scholarship and research -- must be kept separate from the so-called popular functions because they are so vulnerable. He argues that as the university becomes more heterogeneous, the "fit" between the "autonomous" and "popular" functions becomes more awkward.

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I agree. And that's why a diversity of educational missions is essential, with some overlap of course. We do need different kinds of institutions, with different missions and with different budgets, to serve different kinds of students.

There is, of course, one overriding question. Can we have, within such a multilayered system, a "plurality of excellence" -- to borrow Alan Bullock's term? Can, in fact, the research university lions and the 2-year college lambs go to bed together? Well, I must confess that when I first went to New York I saw something which can only be described as "upward drift." Every institution begins to imitate the next one on the ladder.

A sense of equilibrium emerged -- pride, and educational and social obligation. In fact, in recent years something called a "downward drift" is beginning to emerge with the enrollment pinch.

One important point -- mobility within the system is essential. Mass higher education can be excellent if a clear cut division of labor is established.

The third point:

Mass higher education can not only redefine students and the structure, it can revise the undergraduate curriculum as well.

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In the early days, American higher education was more or less cohesive. The missions were--the production of a learned ministry, the creation of a professional class, the passing on of the ethic of the Puritans. These were the goals of Harvard College and of hundreds of imitative institutions. The elective system came along, but this did not remove our notion of a common academic core.

This common heritage notion was, however, sharply challenged in the 1960s. As we admitted students from all social and economic groups, the notion of coherence was sharply challenged.

Diversity, not conformity, was the new ideology to be worshipped. Students, often joined by faculty members, viewed as "cultural imperialism" any attempt intellectually to unite Chicanos, native Americans, blacks, New York Jews, San Francisco WASPs, oriental immigrants, ghetto kids and fundamentalists.

Today, the curriculum pendulum is swinging back again. We are beginning to recognize that a curriculum which suggests that students have "nothing in common" is just as flawed as one which suggests that all students are alike. There is, of course, a danger here. Students must be free to follow their own interests, develop their own aptitudes, retain their own identities, and pursue their own special goals. On this liberty we must not trespass.

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And yet we also recognize that truly educated persons move beyond themselves. They gain social perspective, see themselves in relation to other peoples and times, understand how their origins and wants and needs are tied to the origins and wants and needs of others. Such perspectives are central to the academic quest.

In my own book, Education for Survival, Marty Kaplan and I discuss general education themes drawn from our common heritage, contemporary circumstances, and prospects for the future -- which may transcend culture- and discipline-bound categories of the past.

In any event, the confrontations of the 1960s shook the curriculum skeletons on campus and broke some bones. But I suspect that out of that assault a new, more authentic, notion of liberal education will emerge. What then is the relationship between expanding access and academic excellence?

Conclusion

First -- education and social progress are inextricably tied together and any policy that seeks arbitrarily to limit education beyond high school will not be sustained. Second -- universal higher education does, in fact, have limits. A significant percentage of

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students will not go on to traditional higher education institutions. Third -- as higher education becomes more open than selective, the focus will be on the performance of the institution as well as on the capacity of the student.

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