

22. Equity and Excellence Justify Our Existence

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Since the Second World War we have had several significant, albeit overlapping, periods in American higher education. The years between 1945 and 1965 have been called "The Golden Era" for the colleges and universities in the nation. During this explosive period the number of students nearly tripled. Black students and the proportion of young women in higher education dramatically increased. More college buildings were erected in these years than in the previous 200. A new sector of higher education - the community college - became fully competitive. And research at the nations universities showed unprecedented growth. This was the era of expansion.

However, during the 1960s a development of such importance emerged that it stands as a distinct influence in American academic life. While physical and numerical growth continued, ideological reaction set in and led to the period of confrontation.

In the presence of disturbing student demonstrations, a shrill national debate was generated on the purposes of colleges and universities in a democratic society. The war in Southeast Asia dramatized the issue of the university's connections with the "military-industrial complex." The civil rights movement dramatized the extent to which higher education seemed detached from urgent socio-political realities - leading to the student call for "relevance."

Most colleges and universities responded with a rush of innovations - cluster colleges, individualized programs of study, internships and field work. Many academic requirements were hastily abandoned and college control over the lives of students, we called it *in loco parentis*, was removed as well. Campuses were in shock. Thoughtful observers wondered if the academy ever would recover.

Looking back from the vantage point of the 1980s, it seems reasonable to conclude that while changes were substantial, the traditions of academe showed resilience and persistence. In fact, the outcome of the era of confrontation was probably a stand-off. As the folk-saying has it, the more things change, the more they remain the same.

Perhaps the results of this period of confrontation would have been different had there been more time to sort out options and implement reforms. However, by the early 1970s, yet another new crisis came crashing in. A loss of public confidence (which may have been the most important legacy of the period of confrontation) combined with a deep recession pushed American higher education into the era of retrenchment.

This was a time of "scientific" management - cost curves, portfolio studies, economic models, marketing strategies. In the early 1970s, because of disruptions and subsequent litigation, it was popular to choose lawyers as college presidents. During this time of financial crisis, it was popular to choose presidents who were business-orientated. Management strategies, not institutional mission took priority.

This was also an era in which the vigorous campus interest in governance collapsed about as fast as it had emerged. During the days of confrontation, students and faculty were demanding new decision-making arrangements so they could share the "power." But when the agenda shifted from expansion to decline - and tough cutback decisions were on the table - students and faculty beat a fast retreat. Administrators were left to make the tough decisions.

While colleges and universities were hunkering down, content to consolidate, preoccupied with economy and efficiency, still another change of consequence slipped up on them. This new period of change is not yet fully defined, but its features are sufficiently evident for us to designate it, rather unsatisfactorily, as the period of reshaping and accommodation.

Americas higher education is still a vigorous enterprise. Its most distinguishing features have been its diversity and its capacity to adjust. But change is now occurring at a breathtaking pace. The lines defining the nature and function of the university are becoming blurred. The question we confront is how to maintain a balance between the invariability of change and the inevitability of tradition. At least five important forces are reshaping the scope and character of higher education.

First, the composition of the student body is changing. The traditional 18 to 21 year old young adults who study full-time on the campus are now being joined by non-traditional students. The new students are minority and older. Frequently, they choose to drop out of college and return later on, or to return mid-career to upgrade their skills and pursue new goals.

Second, the faculty is changing. Professors are growing older and many serve part-time. Tenure no longer provides the security it once did. Short term contracts are being tested, and for some young scholars, the future in academe is tenuous at best.

Third, the curriculum has shifted too. The core of liberal arts has been overshadowed by new career-based courses. Students, not faculty, now shape the curriculum by the courses they select. The curriculum is market-driven.

Fourth, increasingly, research is being shaped by external forces. There is the continuing influence of national defense contracts and economic competition. Corporate/university connections are being expanded in ways that may remove decisions from university control. And the free-standing corporate campus is now the fastest growing education sector.

And finally, the quality control of higher education is also moving outside the academy. Increasingly, campus evaluation is being shaped by students, by professional accrediting associations, by governmental evaluators, and by commercial college guides.

Here then is the conclusion. Forces more external than internal are reshaping higher education in America. Colleges and universities survived with institutional integrity during the period of expansion, and even during later confrontation and retrenchment. We can hope that now, in this new period of accommodation they will again prevail in the work that will always justify their existence - education, higher education that combines equity and excellence for all students, and, thus, for all the people.