

## 52. Luxury at the Price of Excellence

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In the recent Carnegie survey of the professoriate in the United States more than half of the faculty said the academic preparation of undergraduates is "fair to poor." Eighty-three percent agreed that students should be better prepared when they come to college and two-thirds said their institution "spends too much time and money teaching students what they should have learned in school." The relatively poor performance of large numbers of high school students continues to be of great concern in this country. And while some progress has been made, we have a long way to go.

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Two recent books by university professors, now on the bestseller list, have added new fuel to the debate. Allan Bloom, of the University of Chicago, in his book, *The Closing of the American Mind - How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*, presents a gloomy description of undergraduates in America's best colleges and universities. They seem unmoved, he says, by the great intellectual and moral issues that traditionally have been the concerns of the young.

In an interview, Bloom dramatized the effect of the current condition by telling about a student reporter at his own university who came to interview him about his book. It quickly became apparent, Bloom said, that the student had not bothered to read the book and seemed little interested in discussing its ideas. The young man had, however, brought a copy of the *Time* magazine review article and was interested in Bloom's reaction to it. To be known, of course, the book must be read. But beyond the text itself what is fascinating is the widespread interest in the issues raised and the intensity of the debate. Still, Ezra Bowen, the education editor of *Time* who piqued the interest of the student, had summed up the issues as follows:

"In Bloom's analysis," Bowen writes, "the universities went seriously off course in the 1960s when they succumbed to pressure from student activists, feminists, and black radicals for more 'relevance' in the curriculum. This condition hardened into a leftish tyranny whose demands wounded American universities as sorely as right-wing assaults damaged German higher education in Hitler's rise. This egalitarian 'education of openness' as Bloom brands it, was a reform without content, accepting everything and thus denying the supremacy of reason in pursuing the common good."

Bowen goes on to criticize Bloom for extreme assertions that he believes, "damage the credibility of a useful book." Some examples:

- McCarthyism in the 1950s had "no effect whatsoever on curriculum or appointments."
- Good black students "are victims of a stereotype, but one that has been chosen by black leadership."
- "All that is human, all that is of concern to us, lies outside natural science."
- "Slavery (was) laid to rest by the Declaration of Independence and the constitution."
- "The women's movement is not founded on nature."

To cite idiosyncratic nostrums such as these should not blur Bloom's central thesis: Today's young people lack an understanding of Western thought and history as well as a vision of the future. And much of the blame, he argues, must be put on universities which fail to provide the study of literature and philosophy that can enrich the lives of students and revitalize the culture.

The goal Bloom has in mind is to capture once again a coherent perspective of Western heritage. But it also represents, some argue, a cultural chauvinism built within the rigidities of a dogmatic intellectual content. *Washington Post* columnist, Colman McCarthy, in a critique of Professor Bloom's position, hits hard:

"Bloom's reactionary text shows a polemicist denouncing closed minds after padlocking his own. He sounds like the departmental crank who has lost too many faculty senate fights or is piqued that students sign up for courses other than his. No one doubts that higher education is troubled or that too many students enter college more familiar with Michael Jackson than Michelangelo. Bloom suggests few solutions, except to issue generalized calls - 'We need philosophy more than ever.'"

Just how American higher education is to define its mission in a way that will serve diverse needs in an interdependent world is, of course, the crux of the debate.

E. D. Hirsch, of the University of Virginia, in his book, *Cultural Literacy - What every American Needs to Know*, joins Bloom in making the case for content over technique. His argument, and one supported in the *Carnegie College* report, is that there should be a renewed emphasis on information in education, leading to cultural literacy. As Hirsch defines it, cultural literacy is the mastering of basic information that all writers and speakers must have at hand in order to carry on intelligently the discourse of contemporary life. What students need, in short, are the essential facts.

Unlike Bloom, Hirsch argues not for a study of the classics, but for the mastery of specific information that enables individuals to function effectively in a complicated society. Hirsch goes beyond generalities and provides the reader a 63-page list of words, dates, names, and phrases, which he feels represents a high school level of literacy. Only by accumulating "shared symbols, and the shared information that the symbols represent," he writes, "can we learn to communicate effectively with one another in our national community."

One certainly could argue with Hirsch's list of what literate Americans need to know (everything from John Bull to John Doe to Pope John to the Magna Carta, *magna cum laude* and the Maginot Line). Educators and journalists, often with tongue in cheek, have drawn up their own lists. But the point Hirsch makes is valid: even under our diversified system of education there must be a body of common knowledge if a common culture is to be sustained.

While academics argue about goals, the Bloom and Hirsch books reflect far more than an educational debate. They mirror the political and social context, too. Both books, in vary different ways, seek to drive stakes of commonality in our increasingly heterogeneous society. They force us to ask: how can America, with all its diversity, sustain nationhood. And have we created a system of education so broad and divergent that our people cannot any longer stand together?

The current critique reminds us that we cannot afford the luxury of basking in our achievement of universal access to higher education while excellence remains so elusive for so many. Nor should we be unmindful of the dangers of social elitism that, unrestrained, could threaten the soul of our democratic values.

## 54. Science Future Failing the Laboratory Test

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Outdated facilities and equipment have become a growing concern on campuses across the United States. The massive building boom after the Second World War was followed by lean years when maintenance was deferred. A recent report by American college business officers estimates that \$50 billion will be needed to replace old buildings and bring new ones up to standard.

But it's in the laboratories that the problem is most acute. Research is costly and scholars are beginning to worry that American students are working with equipment that is fast becoming obsolete. Last year, 40 percent of the nation's top research universities identified facilities as their most pressing research-related need. And a recent National Science Foundation survey found that 17 percent of all equipment in academic laboratories is more than 10 years old.

The current crisis is heightened by the huge investment American colleges and universities are making in computers. A report by the National Society of Professional Engineers found that the cost of computer equipment for each undergraduate has, from 1981 to 1985, grown almost four fold. "For the first time," the report states, "the value of computer acquisitions has exceeded that of laboratory acquisitions."

To most American academics, Washington holds the key. Of the \$500 million spent each year by universities for scientific facilities and equipment, more than 60 percent is paid for with federal funds. The government's share, many argue, should be greater.

There is a precedent for this position. In 1941, Vannevar Bush, a pioneer in computer science, former president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and later president of the Carnegie Institute of Washington, took the lead in establishing, within the federal government, the Office of Scientific Research and Development. As the war drew to a close, Bush, in response to a request from President Franklin Roosevelt, urged a federal commitment to basic research in peacetime. Dr. Bush's publication, *Science, the Endless Frontier: A Report to the President on a Program for Postwar Research*, is the fundamental text for the modern partnership between government and university science.

Bush wrote: "The publicly and privately supported colleges, universities and research institutes are the centers of basic research. They are the wellsprings of knowledge and understanding. As long as they are vigorous and healthy and their scientists are free to pursue the truth wherever it may lead, there will be a flow of new scientific knowledge to those who can apply it to practical problems in government, or in industry, or elsewhere."

But that was over 40 years ago. Today, the vitality of the partnership has been replaced by a quarrelsomeness about the level and direction of federal research support and there is even a debate about just how serious the facilities problem has become.

Government officials say the situation is not as dire as it is portrayed by academicians. In response, a group of higher education associations recently published a paper that took exception to the government's position. "The message it conveys," the educators said, "is that universities do not face critical problems with research facilities; that universities, state governments, and others have already made major commitments to improvements; and that the federal government has only a modest role to play. We believe that these conclusions are unwarranted."

Washington now puts some \$10 billion a year into academic science and engineering. The problem is, however, that more than one-third of this goes to only two dozen major research universities. Other institutions, especially small liberal arts colleges, get only a tiny portion of the pie. These colleges, which educate mostly undergraduates, are being forced out of costly kinds of research. "Science is now being done primarily with large groups of people working with very expensive equipment and it will mean a whole different model for us," said Mary P. McPherson, president of Bryn Mawr College.

The small, elite colleges in the United States do have a solid record of educating future scientists and engineers, as well as physicians, lawyers, and government leaders. To strengthen their position in the current debate, representatives of 48 of the most prestigious of these colleges--schools like Carleton, Oberlin, Swarthmore and Williams--have urged the federal government to set aside a minimum portion of its scientific research funding for liberal arts institutions.

Hanging like a dark cloud over this whole debate is the issue of how federal research money should be used. A study by the Carnegie Foundation found that, in constant dollars, federal aid dropped during a recent 10-year period for teaching fellowships, for scientific conferences and other special programs for instruction. In contrast, there has been a rise in aid for research and development. Yet, close examination shows that the role of the Department of Defense has dramatically increased; spending grew by 180 percent during this period.

This linkage of higher education to defense has stirred discussion on the campus and, recently, the debate has focused on the Strategic Defense Initiative, popularly known as Star Wars. Last October, 7,000 graduate students and academic scientists and engineers signed a pledge not to participate in SDI research. The controversy has quieted in recent months. Still, if scientific research becomes closely identified with the Department of Defense, all scholarly investigation on campus could, once again, become enmeshed in bitter dispute and, in the process, the cause of academic science would be harmed.

The laboratory is central to research just as the classroom is to teaching. While curriculum and teaching are being scrutinized, it is becoming clear that the status of research and even the condition of facilities and equipment will be part of the growing debate about the quality of American higher education.