

McConnell Symposium

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For the next 10 minutes, I'd like to go back to the drawing board in higher education -- Mac's drawing board where he carefully and imaginatively constructed pictures of what higher education might be. ^{Making up} The drawings on Mac's board had a common theme. He called for different kinds of institutions to serve different kinds of students. "...the role of educators," he wrote, "may well be to attempt to devise more orderly means of pairing students with institutions and programs so that the needs of all can be met without impairing the opportunities of any..." (1957)

On the face of it, that certainly sounds like a modern concern -- somewhat more straightforward and lucid than much of today's policy formulation -- but most of us could probably agree that the goal of meeting students' needs with appropriate educational services is as relevant today as it was 30 years ago.

I should like to present for your consideration and discussion, however, three major differences between Mac's formulation of "differentiation of function to serve student diversity" and today's conception of that apparently timeless issue.

In the first place, whereas Mac directed his attention to research on **individual** differences, we are more concerned about about gaining a better understanding of **group** differences. The

literature of higher education today is more likely to describe student characteristics in terms of their identification with certain groups, such as blacks, Hispanics, Asian-Americans, adults, or women than it is to pursue research on individual differences with variables such as intellectual orientation, complexity of thought, creativity, and the like. Where Mac spoke of "individual differences," we speak of "cultural diversity."

Mac was trained as a psychologist, as was I, and research during and after both World Wars was heavily invested in the study of individual differences -- in mental abilities during WW I and in training and leadership characteristics during and after WW II. Psychology was king of the social sciences in Mac's era, and the understanding of individual differences was high on the national agenda for research and support.

Today -- or maybe yesterday -- sociology was the ascendent social science. The problems in need of solutions are perceived to reside in society rather than in the individual. Individuals are frequently pictured as pushed, pulled, and shoved by social forces that shape them as children and control them as adults. As for institutions, their fate seems largely driven by demographic forces beyond their control. The baby boom, baby bust, minorities as the new majority, and the greying of America are the basic data banks that drive institutional planning.

My question regarding this difference in emphasis between Mac's writing and scholarship and current trends is, Where has the individual gone in our research? Have we, in our concern about understanding group characteristics, failed to understand the needs

of individual learners? Do we know anything at all about the educational needs of a 45 year old Hispanic female by combining what we know about adults, Hispanics, and women? Are we in danger of looking at our students as stereotypes of their group membership?⁷ I am occasionally in the uncomfortable position of realizing how different I am from the research that I study -- and even write about -- on adults and women. Is it likely that the whole of our knowledge is less than the sum of its parts?

The second issue embedded in Mac's general thesis of differentiated functions to match student diversity is the relative priority of equal opportunity and maximizing potential. Mac wrote, "...it is essential for each school to identify the characteristics of individual students and to differentiate their education in a way that will maximize their peculiar potentialities." (1962)

I think it is fair to say that even with the recent calls for attention to the quality of education, there is more concern today for developing competence in students than for encouraging excellence. Legislators and the public are asking more for accountability in developing competence in all high school and college graduates than for excellence in developing the "peculiar potentialities" of each individual.

This issue is, of course, related to the first, but here my question is not so much what we establish as a knowledge base, as how we evaluate the performance of educators and educational institutions. Mac's contention was that it is essential to differentiate education in ways that will maximize individual potential. States are trying hard, many through mandated assessment, to evaluate

colleges on the basis of whether their graduates are competent. Should we be thinking harder about evaluating colleges on how well they are developing the "peculiar potentialities" of their graduates?

The third contrast that I should like to draw between Mac's concerns and what I perceive to be today's trends, is related to differentiation of function among institutions. Mac was interested in directing students to the types of institutions that could best promote their growth. He recognized the problems inherent in this goal. He wrote, "We have no well-formulated plan for determining what kinds of individual differences are educationally significant in a wide variety of learning activities, and we have no accurate means of measuring these differences." (1942). I suspect most of us could agree that we have made little progress over the past quarter of a century in filling those voids. Nevertheless, Mac's premise was that the greater the diversity of the student body, the greater should be the differentiation of function among institutions.

Today's trend, as I see it, is not so much in differentiating the functions of institutions, as in helping **all** institutions to respond to the multiple needs of their increasingly diverse student bodies. With the exception of a few special interest colleges such as black colleges, women's' colleges, or colleges designed especially for adults, the trend is for all colleges to serve their increasingly diverse student bodies with special programs geared to target populations of students. Thus, differentiation of function is more within campuses than among them.

The homogenization of higher education is not a new issue. We worry about it off and on, but Mac's observation in 1962 rings

equally true today. He wrote, "...institutions strive to simulate whatever institution is far enough ahead to serve as a model." The research university is far enough ahead today to serve as a model to which state colleges aspire, pushing faculty hard for research grants and publications. Community colleges seem to have retained their distinctive mission, but frequently at the price of marginal acceptance into the academy of higher education.

I think I see, albeit dimly, a new split in differentiation of function, with community colleges and liberal arts colleges aspiring to establish reputations as teaching institutions, and research universities and state colleges aspiring to reputations as research institutions. While first and second echelons are clearly apparent in this pairing, if it exists, it would have the merit of offering two prestige models, thereby breaking the old pattern of prestige measured in terms of selectivity and resources.

The questions raised in this contrast between the pictures on Mac's drawing board and our own are, 1) To what extent can we serve student diversity, which is growing almost everywhere, by expanding the special services and programs of individual campuses? and 2) Should we encourage the preservation and/or creation of colleges with a special concern for ethnic minorities, women, and adults?

The opportunity to re-read Mac's very substantial contribution to educational thought and planning raised for me many questions about current directions. Is it possible to combine the best of Mac's vision with the best of our own? Can we develop the "peculiar potentialities" of individuals through a better understanding of the

cultures from which they come? Can we work equally hard at developing the competence of all and the excellence of many? Can we provide for diversity both within institutions and among them?