

OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE FUTURE OF ACCESS TO EDUCATION

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In today's assignment to the panelists you have the FIPSE style, and perhaps its recipe for success -- think big, expect the impossible, create provocative environments, take some risks, and press for quality. The risk, in this case, is that friends of FIPSE will limit their praise for the past and hopes for the future to ten minutes. I am going to immediately reduce that risk to some extent by pledging to take my seat in nine minutes.

A little more than ten years ago, Russ Edgerton and I were sitting in a government-gray room here in Washington, charged with the very exciting task of drafting the first guidelines for FIPSE. Those early conversations with Russ and a changing panel of others were among the most stimulating of my academic career. We had the luxury of thinking about all of the things that needed doing and the ways in which FIPSE might make a difference. FIPSE has, I think, made a difference. It has matured with grace without losing its freshness. While I recognize that this occasion is special and a celebration, I hope the exercise of asking a group

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of presumed authorities in higher education to suggest an agenda for the future will not become a practice with FIPSE. The freshness which seems to distinguish FIPSE from most government bureaucracies is due largely to FIPSE's grassroots approach to problem solving, which has several advantages. First, it leaves problem definition to people on the working front of education who are intimately acquainted with the problems of education. As fans of John Naisbitt's book, Megatrends, know, one of the most successful schools of thought about social forecasting is that trends will show up first in the aggregated items of local newspapers. Thus, the grassroots approach turns out to be one of the more sophisticated methods for gathering intelligence and forecasting social, economic, political, and technological trends. I suspect that one reason FIPSE appears to be ahead of the pack in identifying emerging problems is its heavy reliance on using the people who are experiencing the problems to identify them.

The second advantage of FIPSE's grassroots approach lies in finding workable solutions. It makes perfectly good sense to assume that someone who has identified a problem will understand best the full ramifications of it, will have some ideas about realistic solutions, and will have considerable enthusiasm for making those solutions work.

FIPSE's grassroots approach to problem identification and solution has served it well in the past, and there is every reason

to think that aggregating the ideas contained in the proposals of two or three thousand working educators will do a better job of predicting the needs of the future than I will. Unintimidated by that knowledge, however, I shall plunge ahead to make some observations about the future, specifically the future of equal access to educational opportunity.

Access has been the major item on the agenda of postsecondary education for some three decades now. Despite all that remains to be done, it is clear that postsecondary education has been permanently changed toward serving more representative segments of the population. But it is also clear that the agenda for access is in a constant state of flux. I'd like to distinguish between four types of agendas for the future regarding the issue of access. I have labeled them the unfinished agenda, the revealed agenda, the tension agenda, and the modified agenda.

The unfinished agenda is familiar to all of us. There are still many people who could benefit from postsecondary education who are not participating, and there is some cause for concern that as a nation we are retreating from the commitment to provide equal educational opportunity for all. The unfinished agenda, however, must be considered in the context of other types of agendas.

I have used the label revealed agenda to describe the new problems that are revealed as a result of the progress in the accomplishment of the original agenda. For example, the original

access agenda brought millions of students into our colleges who were ill-prepared for college level work. This calls for the development of remedial programs. FIPSE's work in developing and disseminating innovative programs for teaching the basic skills is an example of excellent work on the revealed agenda. Revealed agendas operate like chain reactions. Open admissions revealed the need for remedial programs, which revealed the need for new forms of instruction, which revealed the need for faculty development. FIPSE has been especially effective in identifying the revealed agendas of the access issue, and I see continuing access related issues that are not yet revealed as a major task for the foreseeable future.

The tension agenda, like the revealed agenda, arises out of the successful accomplishments of the original agenda, but it seems to follow some impatience with the progress of the items on the revealed agenda. The tension between equality and excellence is an example. If the revealed agenda fails, i.e., if those gaining access fail to become educated, the tension agenda could snap, with the result that faculty in open admissions colleges will call for selective admissions or for an end to affirmative action or any of a number of other steps that would appear to reject the original access agenda. The tension agenda, as its name suggests, most often holds two values in tension and searches for ways to maintain both values, while reducing the tension between them. Some of FIPSE's

efforts in the next ten years will have to go to a reconciliation between access and excellence, between responsiveness to students and the marketplace and curricular coherence, between technology and humanism, and between cooperation and autonomy among the multiple providers of educational services.

Finally, there is the modified agenda. I am not altogether happy with the label on this one, but I am referring here to external social forces which change the rationale of the original agenda. For example, the reason for the original access agenda was public recognition of the social injustice of barring certain people from educational opportunity. The social justice rationale eventually encompassed ethnic minorities, women, the elderly, adult part-time learners, the handicapped, and just about any other group in society that had been denied access to equal educational opportunity. Many are concerned that there is less indignation about social injustice today than there was ten years ago when FIPSE first appeared upon the scene. Without question it is hard to maintain the momentum of indignation over the decades of time that it takes to accomplish major social change. But as people grow weary of fighting old battles, shifting rationales attract new friends and new energy. The rationale for a universally educated populace is shifting now to the argument that productivity and economic prosperity are dependent on human capital. Instead of supporting universal education because everyone has a

right to it, the modified agenda takes up the battle on the grounds that the nation has a need for the maximum development of its human capital.

In the next ten years, we will hear more about the need for human resource development through education than about equal educational opportunity. That is not necessarily bad. Used wisely, the modified access agendas will strengthen the arguments for universal educational opportunity by adding human capital rationales to the social justice rationale that has dominated the past.

Without FIPSE the past decade would have been duller, less imaginative and less hopeful. FIPSE has demonstrated that the working people in postsecondary education across the nation are capable of solving their own problems, with relatively modest help and encouragement.