

The Changing Student Mix: Problems And Prospects

You have been thinking during this conference about the problems and prospects for higher education in America. Quite recently, I have had an unusual opportunity to talk with educators all over the country about this very subject.

In working as a consultant to HEW's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, part of my task has been to meet with leaders of the educational community to get some help in defining problems and setting priorities. It has been interesting to me to observe that in almost every group we have convened, sooner or later, someone has questioned the assumption that responsiveness to changing demands is an unmixed blessing and has suggested that the major problem with colleges today is that they lack integrity--that they are being pushed from their real purposes by students, state and federal legislators, newspaper editors and reporters, and a host of people who fail to grasp the true mission of higher education. Some have urged that major attention be given to the legitimacy or validity of the demands for change. They have a point, I think. Our present tendency in society as well as in education is to glorify innovation, reform, and change, and to condemn the status quo without looking carefully at either where we are and where we want to go.

So today, I want to try to really engage this question about whether we have a mandate for change in higher education with particular attention to the changing mix of the student population.

Sir Eric Ashby has identified three environmental forces for change acting on systems of higher education. One is customer demand--the pressure for greater freedom of access to college and the accompanying demands for

education to fit the needs of the new clientele. The second force for change consists of the manpower needs of society--the "suction" drawing graduates into jobs for which they are presumably prepared in college. Third, is the influence of the patron. Increasingly, higher education must look to the state, i.e., to the taxpayer for its ultimate financial support. And the patrons of higher education are raising some new questions about education and its accountability to the public.

Counter balancing the three forces for change, says Ashby, are two forms of resistance to change. One is simple inertia which has the virtue of lending a kind of cautious stability against the pressures of the latest fads and the capricious whims of customers, manpower needs, and patrons. A second more fundamental resistor to educational change is what Ashby calls the "inner logic" of the system--faith in the purpose of the system or of the institution.

One could, I think, take issue with Ashby on his classification of forces for and against change. I would be more inclined than Ashby, for example, to classify the inner logic or integrity of education as coming down on the side of the need for change. Likewise I think one could look at unprecedented customer demand as an argument for leaving well enough alone. Since people are scrambling all over themselves to buy what we have to offer, why change the product? Nevertheless, Ashby has presented a useful framework from which to hang an analysis, and that is what I wish to do.

I want to spend most of my time today looking at the force for change labeled customer demand. Despite the statistics showing that the majority of college graduates are happy with their education and would even choose the same college if they had it to do over again, no one can deny that some

customers are demanding changes. The student counterculture has voiced demands through confrontation tactics, and when that hasn't been effective, they have occasionally tried pressure within the system, or failing all else have dropped out, boycotting the product. Strangely enough these vocal and articulate critics are just the kind of students that traditional higher education was designed to serve. But today these young people, whose college educated parents have been able to give them a material as well as an intellectual heritage, claim that higher education is no longer relevant to their personal needs or to those of society.

What do they want? Well, what they say they want is--you'll pardon the expression--greater relevance. One can quibble over the inarticulateness of that word, but I think it is fairly clear that they are asking for problem-oriented education. They want to be able to answer questions--about what to do to make the world a better place for human beings and about themselves and their role in life. The world seems beset with problems that our great faith in knowledge leads us to believe can be solved. We need a cure for cancer; an answer to the too rapid use of the world's natural resources; individual and collective attention to the problems of the despoiling of the environment. And we desperately need better ways of dealing with the problems of the widening gap between the have's and the have not's. This generation of traditional college students--young people who come from the type of families that historically have sent their sons and daughters to college--have grown up free of pressing worries about material matters. They have been given everything their relatively affluent parents can buy with money, and the problems they see are human and social.

Most young people, rich or poor, want a better life than that of their parents, and for many traditional college students living in suburbia that means less dependence on tranquilizers and alcohol, closer human relationships within the family, less rigid class distinctions between men and women, between blacks and whites, and between the country club set and the family across the tracks.

For students interested in those questions, we do indeed seem to be lecturing on navigation while the ship is going down. The college degree itself isn't especially important to this group of students because it will only buy more of the same, and that isn't good enough. There can be no argument with the fact that these customers are a force for change.

At the other extreme are the customer change forces that I have called New Students to higher education. These are students who have not in the past been considered "college material." Poor students academically, and usually financially, these young people have, unconsciously perhaps, demanded change through the method of passive resistance. They have not bought what we have offered. The idea is well expressed in the old wisdom that goes, One can no more say that something has been taught when nothing has been learned than that something has been sold when nothing has been bought.

Like traditional college students, new students to higher education see grave differences between the have's and the have not's--but they are the have not's relative to their more affluent peers. For them the way to a better life than that of their parents is to improve their material and social status and prestige. Research indicates that they want education to provide them with better jobs and higher wages, greater security, and

higher social status. These students are realists. They know that it is the degree and not necessarily the education that is the key to these opportunities. Thus these customers can satisfy some major needs by buying the degree without questioning its contents. To be blunt, what many want is the wrappings of the degree as long as it retains its legal tender and as long as the employer will pay full price without looking inside the package. As long as these conditions prevail these new students will not be vocal forces for change, but we should not be deluded into thinking that they are getting personal satisfaction from the educational content or that employers and taxpayers will continue to pay high prices for empty boxes.

But it is now becoming apparent that the degree per se is losing its market value. It was worth a lot when it was rare and only 10 percent of the population had one. In the economic world of supply and demand it is worth less and less as it becomes more and more common. Once again fate plays its cruel trick. The mere fact that the "have not's" are finally getting degrees reduces their value.

No group is more alert to this danger than black intellectuals. Increasingly one hears calls from the black leadership not to settle for the credential without the education.

And they are right, of course. When college degrees were relatively scarce, employers depended on them as a screening device, not so much to tell them about the education of the applicant as to tell them about characteristics of dependability, persistence, and social background. The fact that postsecondary education has now become non-selective and that the majority rather than the minority of high school graduates are entering

college makes the degree less useful to employers, and they are going to begin to look for something else. They might look at grades, but there is a trend to abolish grades. They might develop their own admissions tests to employment. And some are doing that. Down the long road of the future, education might eventually extricate itself from the embarrassment of screening young people for employment--which will leave the more awesome task of preparing people for employment as well as for living.

Like it or not, almost everyone outside the walls of academe--students, parents, society at large--believes that that the major purpose of postsecondary education is to prepare students for careers. Thus, as Ashby observes, manpower needs are a powerful magnet for change.

While the demands of the job market can have a rather sudden, and not always healthy impact on course--and even college-enrollments, the manpower needs of society in the broader sense are likely to change education more slowly. New concerns with ecology, urban problems, health needs, and the like tend to bring about new combinations of traditional specialties rather than to create more fundamental change in the nature of education itself.

I believe that the most fundamental change in higher education is created by our customers backed up by our patrons. Ashby observes that, "...higher education systems are not (they never have been) supported by customers or employers; they are nowadays under the patronage, that is to say the ultimate financial control, of the state."¹ Our patrons have decreed

¹Chronicle of Higher Education, "Sir Eric Ashby on Mass Higher Education", October 2, 1972, p 8.

that postsecondary education is a right and not a privilege, and that single word expressing a simple concept implies massive change. The federal government has demanded freedom of access for all and is moving rapidly to eradicate ability to pay as a criterion for admission. Through legislative action, Congress has tied financial support to the requirement that postsecondary education must serve blacks as well as whites and women as well as men. In a gentler but equally persuasive manner, the Congress has put new money on vocational and career education and thus encouraged curricular change to serve a new clientele. State governments have been even more emphatic in their demands for change. Some have backed their faith in colleges and universities as teaching institutions with ill-advised attempts to prescribe minimum numbers of classroom contact hours per week per faculty member. Almost all states now have forced the concept of open admissions through establishing a network of low cost, open door community colleges.

Education has not yet assimilated these demands for universal education that are promulgated by our patrons. We are not yet really concerned about the fact that college dropout figures parallel very closely the selectivity index for colleges and universities. Dropouts from the Stanfords, the Harvards, and Wellesleys are very unusual; they are somewhat more common at state universities such as Indiana University or Ohio State; they are higher still at typical state colleges, and the dropout rate from public community colleges is a national disgrace.

There are several explanations for this state of affairs. The most common is that the very goal of selectivity is to pick the winners. That is, the selection process consisting of optimal weightings of test scores, grades, recommendations, and interviews, is designed to select those who will do well

in college and who will in due course--preferably four years---obtain their degrees. The more stringent you can be in picking those who will succeed, the lower your dropout rate will be.

A related explanation is that students who go to the Stanfords of this nation come from homes where academic achievement and graduation from college are goals that are encouraged and reinforced by family and society. Not only do these students face no major problems in satisfactory academic performance, but they are not likely to have to drop out of college for extra-academic reasons such as finances or early marriages.

These explanations are satisfactory only as long as we assume that the "given" is the college, and that because college is "good" we should pick those who can benefit from what it offers. If the purpose of college is to train a cadre of leaders for the society, and if the traditional college experiences enhance the leadership value of those with the greatest potential, then one might argue that for the overall good of society, colleges should bet on winners. The trouble is that those assumptions, made in an earlier era of scarcity of resources and high societal need for intellectual and technological expertise, are no longer true. We have moved to a philosophy that rejects the notion of an elite leadership in favor of one that spreads participation across the broad spectrum of the society. Thus instead of improving society through the education of a hierarchy of leaders, our goal is to raise the standard of living through education of the masses.

Not only has our goal changed, but our methods are under fire. We have had a dreadful time trying to demonstrate through research and evaluation that the traditional college curriculum does much to enhance the leadership of those who seem to do best at it. Obviously, it does even less for those who do poorly and who drop out.

Thus it would appear that we have little to lose by some fairly drastic experimentation--to see if we can develop experiences that would make more impact on both traditional and new students to higher education.

But young people of various needs and talents are not the only clientele we must provide for under the mandate of our patrons for universal postsecondary education. Two other groups of customers are making demands for change. The fastest growing segment of education in the United States consists of adults. The number of college students between the ages of 25 and 35 has tripled over the last two decades,² and adult enrollments in learning opportunities outside the recognized educational "core" is growing even faster.³

Adults are not, by and large, a captive audience for educational institutions; they will go where they can get the greatest value for the expenditure of their time, energy, and money. Thus, it is highly significant that most adult education involving formal attendance at classes, lectures, and discussion groups is taking place in non-educational institutions--churches, private business, YMCAs, governmental agencies, the armed forces, and other community agencies.⁴ It is quite apparent that the educational establishment has left some important vacuums that other agencies have filled. Now, of course, colleges and universities are beginning to woo the rich adult market with various models of nontraditional options.

The nontraditional studies movement is a mixed bag of reactions and motivations. On the one hand, it has a heavy rhetoric about implementing

¹New students and new places: A report and recommendation by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971

²Moses, S. The learning force: An approach to the politics of education. Syracuse, N.Y.: Educational Policy Research Center, Syracuse University Research Corporation, March 1970

³Johnstone and Rivera, 1965

the national policy of educational opportunity for all. It hopes to abolish discrimination on the basis of age, geographical isolation, part-time student status, etc. At the same time, it is a bold attempt to challenge many of the false assumptions of traditional education, primarily those related to time and place requirements. No one can put forth a very strong argument that four years, chopped into 120 credit hours, delivered to people who can present themselves physically in a room set aside for "classes" makes much sense as the major strategy of education.

But the third reason for the vitality of the nontraditional studies movement is that, rightly or wrongly, institutions facing financial crises see the same market that the new business and media entrepreneurs see--adults with the motivation, money, and the capacity for independent study.

And so added to the change forces of young students, is a third powerful customer demand. What do these potential customers want? Adults want new delivery systems for education; they want recognition of learning as a life-long process; and they, like everyone else we are hearing from these days, want an end to being treated as the second-class citizens of education who attend second-rate evening divisions of adult education. They too, are asking that education become integrated with life--that the educational establishment open the door to part-time students and that they recognize the infinite learning opportunities outside of the classroom.

Finally, I want to say something about a group of customers that cuts across all of the others I have mentioned but that has some unique demands right now. I am talking about women in this society. What do they want? They want in. How paradoxical it is that traditional education "fits"

women better than any of the other new clientele. And yet education remains reluctant to admit them to the market place.

Many traditional academicians eager to preserve "academic standards" have failed to recognize the by now well-known fact that on virtually every measure of the most traditional aspects of education, women as a group are more desirable "students" (as that concept is presently defined) than men. From grade school through college women make markedly better grades than men. They are much more likely than men to express interest in the heart of liberal education--literature and humanities, art and music. And they are also more likely to express interest in the spirit of liberal education--in the pursuit of education as cultural heritage, for personal enrichment, and the pleasure of being a well-rounded and educated person.

Yet in conscious and subconscious ways, women have been systematically excluded from the halls of academe. The more prestige and academic visibility the position or institution has, the more difficult women find it to become accepted as full participants. The research on the discrimination against women as graduate students, faculty, and administrators is so well-known as to need no repetition here.⁵

What I, and most of my professional sisters, have great difficulty understanding, is the lack of commitment and interest in this question. I am even more aware of the apathy after the ACE meeting on "Women in Higher Education" than I was before I attended it. I should think the issue of discrimination against women in higher education would build a strong

⁵See Women in Higher Education, Background papers of the 55th Annual Meeting of the American Council on Education, ACE, 1972.

coalition for reform among men in the academy for the following three motivations. First, those with a high concern for ethical and moral values should be actively railing against discrimination on any basis, be it race, age, or sex. Second, those who are academic traditionalists and do not want to dilute educational standards should be out actively seeking women students and faculty members if for no other reason than for the strong statistical probability that there are more bright women with high academic potential left to be recruited than there are men.

The third group that should be making up this coalition for women's rights are the practical reality-oriented administrators. I doubt that the women's movement can be stopped. Given this assumption, one bright thing for any politically astute administrator to do is to jump on a moving bandwagon that is just slightly ahead of the crowd and in so doing make himself eligible for being proclaimed a leader of his times. Furthermore, for the realists of the academic world, there is the matter of avoiding trouble--such as keeping clear of the affirmative action programs of HEW

and of militant women whose numbers and militancy seems to me to be growing rapidly. Thus men who consider themselves moral, scholarly, and/or politically astute should be much more interested in the question of women's rights than I perceive them to be.

In summary, we have the demands of the new and old customers; we have the inevitable changes in manpower needs; and we have new social philosophies that affect higher education. All in all, I see very little future for the institution that decides to hold the line against change. I think that decision would be like the railroads of the 1950s. Some of you in this room will remember that the railroads at the height of their glory were the epitomy of

arrogance combined with bumbling inefficiency. They had been so busy expanding in the 1940's that they had become used to ignoring customer dissatisfaction, and they accepted it, and their own lack of progressive leadership, as a way of life. They just never believed that airplanes would change the world of transportation until it was all over.

In answer to the question, to change or not to change, I suggest that all institutions must change in the direction of greater integration of education with life.

There are many ways to do this and you will be discussing these after the coffee break. Possible changes range from the radical approaches of free universities to the historically well established cooperative education movement which is undergoing a rather remarkable revival today. Between these two models, which are really quite similar because they are both rooted in a commitment to make education relevant to life, are a variety of new procedures that can be classified as parts of the nontraditional movement. Space-free/time-free education, the implementation of the concept of life-long learning, credit recognition for extra-classroom learning are all methods for weaving education into the fabric of life. Every constituency--the radical counter-culture, conservative new students, and adults are demanding that education become part of life.

Aside from that universal imperative, there are degrees of change associated with each group of new clientele that I have described. In drawing these analogies, I am not presenting models for each constituency, but rather pointing to the diversity of the new student mix and suggesting relative amounts of change needed for each.

Many women will disagree with me, but I believe that relatively little change is required to accommodate the demands of women. I am not implying by this observation that women are conservative or undemanding or that they won't

make changes on college campuses. Some of the changes that they will make will be traumatic for some males. But they won't be traumatic for education. Of all the new clientele "out there," there are large numbers of women students, women faculty, and women administrators with the same ideas and values about higher education that the men on campus already hold. In other words, postsecondary education does not have to make many more changes for traditional females than for traditional males.

The unique demand of women as customers is just this: To stop all forms of discrimination. I realize, of course, that that is much easier said than done. For some time to come the problems of discrimination will require hard conscious effort. We should keep in mind, however, that ultimately the goal is to forget about the class the individual represents and to make it possible for each person to pursue fully his or her own goals.

A second, somewhat more complex level of necessary change is represented by the customers labeled adults. Adults are harder than women per se to assimilate into the present system. They require rather fundamental change in the form of traditional education, but we could keep essentially the same content as for traditional college students. In adults we have students who are motivated and able to handle the traditional content, but who need new methods of delivery, new measures of competency, and new flexibilities in procedures. In other words, we could devote our major attention to changing the form of higher education with relatively less attention to overhaul of the content--except, of course, to recognize that adults will bring their own life experiences to bear on the curriculum and in this way will press hard for curricular reform, but that pressure is not unlike the pressure being brought by traditional college students.

Finally, New Students to higher education--those who have not done well in the traditional system for whatever reasons--require the greatest and most sweeping changes of all. Neither the content nor the form of traditional higher education is appropriate for this group of young people. They are a challenge to the idea of education itself and what it can and should do to develop the unique potential of each learner. If we can crack this problem, then we can handle the less complex levels of change required by our customers.

I think the cutting edge of reform in postsecondary education lies in changed perceptions about the meaning and purposes of education. The purpose of college is no longer to pick winners or to train an elite cadre of leaders or to screen candidates for employment. It is quite clearly to educate people--blacks as well as whites, women as well as men, adults as well as youth, the academically able as well as those whose talents lies in other directions.