

To Change Or Not To Change--Is That The Question?*

by

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In these days when change is the only constant, many of us are so busy coping with various pressures for change that we rarely sit back and ask whether change is really necessary or desirable. Thus, I was intrigued and trapped into this assignment when your chairman asked me to address not the usual question of new directions but the prior question of whether we should accede to the pressures for change.

The question of whether to resist pressures for change is not one that is very comfortable for most college professors. The academic academy has long taken pride in its reputation for advocacy of progressive change in the society. Socially and politically, colleges and universities have been regarded as bastions of liberal thought, which is defined in the dictionary as an open mindedness to ideas that challenge tradition and established institutions. Thus it is unsettling, to say the least, to find that it is the home of the liberals that is the "established institution" whose traditions are being questioned. By whom are they being questioned, and what is the validity of the arguments for change?

Sir Eric Ashby has identified three forces for change acting on systems of higher education. One is customer demand--the pressure for greater freedom

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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. But the prior question is the demand of our patrons to serve these new customers.

Our patrons have decreed that postsecondary education is a right and not a privilege, and if we take that seriously, we have a mandate for massive change. For traditional higher education was never designed to serve the masses. Let's look at both the words and the actions of our patrons.

The federal government has demanded freedom of access to postsecondary education and is moving rapidly to eradicate economic status as a criterion for admission. Also through legal 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.

All of these pressures push in the same direction--toward providing postsecondary education for all. These patron pressures are not whimsical or without purpose. Rather, they represent a new design for raising the standard of living in this country. When technology was young and educational resources were scarce, it made sense to educate only the most promising young people in the expectation that they would use their knowledge and skill to improve life for everyone.

Now there seems an unending supply of the comforts and luxuries of tech-

nology. The problem for the future is not so much in the generation of new technology and new products as in better distribution systems, broader-based knowledge, and greater concern for individual development. The way to raise the standard of living for everyone is no longer to train leaders but rather to educate the masses to their full humanity.

Certainly we will continue to educate leaders; we will always need intellectual leadership. But institutions of postsecondary education have taken on an additional and much more difficult assignment. The task of the new education is not to select the most promising for advanced education, but to make life better for every student crossing the threshold. Just as soon as colleges agree to do what they can for all comers, they forego the luxury of selecting students who fit their way of life, and take on the obligation of adapting themselves to the needs of students.

Let's look then at the questions raised by the customers to see what it means for postsecondary education. 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 these questions, we do indeed seem to be lecturing on navigation while the ship is going down. There can be no argument with the fact that these customers are a force for change.

At the other end of the academic continuum are the customer change forces that I have called New Students to higher education (Cross, 1971). 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.

But it is becoming increasingly apparent that better jobs and higher wages are not an inevitable outcome of a college education. Once again fate plays its cruel trick. The mere fact that the "have not's" are finally getting degrees reduces their economic value.

And so young people generally seem to be raising questions about both the intrinsic and extrinsic values of a college education. But higher

education now has another important constituency that does not consist of either traditional or new college students. It consists of adults and part-time learners. What do they want?

Although adults have been considerably more restrained about it than have some of the young people, it is quite apparent from some recent data collected for the Commission on Non-Traditional Study (Educational Testing Service, unpublished data) that they too are demanding relevance in education. The message is clear that they want to learn how to do things--as opposed to how to think about things. Adult men are most interested in returning to school to improve their vocational and professional skills whereas women are most interested in sewing and cooking and crafts and gardening. And those interests are in the lead for college graduates as well as for the general population.

Adult learning priorities seem to be dictated by the usefulness of the learning. Highest in priority are those skills that are needed by all adults in the course of daily living--vocational skills, investment, and home repair for men; home and family skills for women, and sports and leisure time activities for both men and women. Next in order comes learning that will foster personal development and community responsibility--humanities and the arts (especially for women) and public affairs and community problems. And finally at the bottom of the list of preferences, endorsed by fewer than ten percent of the potential adult learners, are the basic academic tools of social, biological, and physical sciences and English language. Once again, college graduates aren't much more interested in learning more about these staples of academe than are the general public. The problem, I suggest, is not that the social and physical sciences are inherently dull or unimportant,

but that they are taught as background for professional scholars-- and not many of the new clientele have any interest in becoming professional scholars. The physical and social sciences, after all, form the backbone of the new terribly popular--with young and old alike--curricula in ecology and urban studies. But these courses of study have a problem-oriented focus. They are taught in order to solve problems--not to perpetuate the discipline into graduate school.

So adult learners, like traditional and New Students, do challenge the heart of higher education--the curriculum. But equally important--and more likely to succeed--is their challenge to the time and place requirements of traditional education. It is this battle that the nontraditional studies movement has taken on. 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. A concept of education for all the people requires new methods of delivery to take education into prisons, into homes, and into industrial plants. We need new measures of competency that acknowledge that what is learned rather than how it is learned is the true measure of education. And we need new flexibilities that can begin to make life-long learning a reality.

Finally, an analysis of customer pressures for change would not be complete without some mention of still serious problems of discrimination in institutions of higher education.

More attention has been given to the special needs of ethnic minorities and women than to other groups of new clientele. And yet their challenge to educational tradition as represented in the academic disciplines and

institutional procedures is not nearly so great as that presented by New Students or adults. True, the demands for equality of educational opportunity on the part of ethnic minorities and women has struck a deep emotional response in the white male-dominated system of higher education. Affirmative action is a personal threat to ruling faculty, administrators, and students too. But minorities and women are not a threat to the content and form of traditional education except as they constitute highly visible segments of traditional students, New Students, and adult populations.

It is hard to talk about curricular or classroom needs that are based on the color or shape of one's skin. But my assumption is that the new education must be broadly interpreted to encompass the full development of individual potential. Given that interpretation, the educational problems of ethnic minorities and women are profound.

We have been shamefully slow but we have made considerable progress in admitting minorities and women to equal opportunity in higher education. But all is not well. Voluntary racial segregation is a growing phenomenon on integrated campuses, and the frustration of women--especially at graduate and faculty levels--is becoming more widespread and intense. Highly sensitized women and ethnic minorities are becoming increasingly aware that it is easier to deal with overt discrimination that can be fought head-on than it is to deal with covert and frequently unconscious discrimination on the part of well-meaning people.

The full meaning of universal postsecondary education has probably not been understood, and certainly not accepted, by the majority of people whose life work is education. The most common positions among faculty who con-

sider themselves enlightened are that higher education should be open to all those able and willing to do the work in the manner and form in which it is presently offered. A second position is practiced by a growing minority of misguided liberals who are willing to "lower the standards" of academic education in order to get credentials in the hands of the "disadvantaged" so that they can obtain for themselves the material and social benefits of society.

Neither position, it seems to me, is adequate for these times. The purpose of education is not to certify (especially not falsely) nor is it to prepare a band of elite intellectual leaders (except perhaps in graduate education). It is to maximize the potential of each person to live a fulfilled and constructive life. And to accomplish that end, we need not lower standards. Quite the contrary, we should organize education around the premise that we must demand of each student the highest standards of performance in the utilization of his or her talents. But if we are to meet the demands of our patrons and our customers, we shall have to make room for the development of a much wider range of talents than that called for by traditional higher education.