

National Trends in Higher Education

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Your attention today will be directed to planning for the future of Mills College in the 1980's. That is a difficult and challenging task. It requires a careful, and perhaps ruthlessly objective, analysis of the history and present strengths of Mills, as well as some understanding of the state of higher education in the society of which Mills is a part.

My function here today is to talk about the changing scene of higher education nationally. It is my understanding that the afternoon sessions will provide an opportunity for you to talk about the implications of national trends for the future of Mills College.

My background description of the past, present, and future of higher education in this country should not be taken as any prescription for Mills College to align itself with either the cutting edge of change or with the central movement of higher education as it has attempted to meet national needs. You may decide that the role that Mills can best play is to carve out a distinctive mission that is not reflected in the general movements of higher education. But it is important, I think, to understand the changing role of higher education generally in this country. Colleges, whether public or

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private, are creations of society. And as the nation's needs change, so the missions for education change. Some goals, such as equality of educational opportunity, are consciously set forth through national policy. Others, such as the current emphasis on vocational preparation, are determined by social and economic conditions. Some missions are nationwide, while others are relatively distinct to an institution or group of institutions. But attitudes and expectations for higher education have changed markedly over the years. Indeed, the expectations for higher education probably change more quickly than the responses on the part of colleges and universities.

At this particular time in history, higher education as a national enterprise is facing an unknown future, but we know that it will not be a simple extension of the familiar past. For two hundred years now, the forward thrust for higher education in America has been growth--more students, more faculty, more courses, more colleges, more money. But it is now painfully apparent that future planning for higher education as a national enterprise will not be based on growth, and we do not know much about planning for other kinds of change.

The old growth model has reached the limit for some aspects of higher education and the point of practical absurdity for others. Consider the two most critical components of higher education--students and subject matter. Conceptually, if not yet practically, the nation has reached the limit in finding new groups of students to serve. And practically,

if not conceptually, we have reached the point of practical absurdity in adding more subject matter to an already bloated curriculum.

It is hardly prophetic to suggest that before the end of this century, colleges will be serving ethnic minorities, women, poor people, prisoners, senior citizens, part-time learners, low achievers, and anyone else who wants to go to college. Up to now egalitarians have always been able to point to some segment of the population that could constitute a new clientele. The Morrill Act added the children of the working classes to the college student population. The GI Bill introduced the notion that a college education was a right rather than a privilege and that any young man who had served his country in time of war had a right to a college education. The community colleges followed up the notion that if education beyond high school was a right, then it should be made convenient and accessible to all young people. And the adult movement followed quickly and logically with the concept that education is not just for the young, but for everyone who has a need or a desire to learn. Thus, the ever-expanding student body has been a major characteristic of American higher education, and each wave of new students has brought with it sweeping changes in the national character of higher education.

It is worthwhile, I think, to spend a few minutes looking at four distinct phases of American higher education, on the grounds that those concerned with planning for the future, need to understand the impact of societal needs on higher education as a national enterprise,

and they need to understand the impact of national changes in higher education on individual institutions.

The first phase of American higher education was the aristocracy. Epitomized by private colleges such as Harvard and Yale, its purpose was to bring culture to the raw frontier. The curriculum was largely classical dedicated to the training of gentlemen, ministers, and teachers. The students came from established and well-connected families because it was assumed that the leaders of the future would come from the families of the leaders of the past.

The age of the aristocracy prevailed until the passage of the Morrill Act. Then the land grant institutions dominated the scene for more than 100 years, deriving their vigor from the mission of serving a new clientel, consisting largely of the bright, ambitious sons and daughters of farmers and factory workers. The purpose of the meritocracy was to meet the need for agricultural and industrial production for the growing nation. The task for higher education, as society saw it during the reign of the meritocracy, was to select the most promising young people and to prepare them for positions of future leadership.

The meritocracy peaked in the 1950's with selective admissions and scholarships based on grades and test scores rather than on financial need. When I graduated from high school, for example, the Illinois State Scholarship program consisted of a scholarship given to every high school valedictorian. The scholarship was a prize, not a form of financial aid. It, like professional salaries today, was a measure of one's worth and had nothing to do with financial need.

The prototypes of the meritocracy were, and perhaps still are, the great land grant universities. At its peak, the meritocracy was characterized by intense competition. Students competed for admission, for scholarships, for grades, for a bid to a sorority or fraternity, for the honor of being homecoming queen, or the president of student government. There was constant pressure to prove that one's position in life was based on personal merit, and this applied not only to students but to institutions and faculty as well. Meritocratic institutions derived their prestige from the selectivity of their admissions process, from the prowess of their football teams, and from competition for faculty luminaries who then set up competitive research institutes. The philosophy of the meritocracy, although weakened a little by the turbulence of the late 1960's, still prevails in many, maybe most, research universities, most of which were founded during the rise of the meritocracy between 1850 and 1900.

The 1950's brought the third great era in American higher education--the age of egalitarianism. The mid-twentieth century looked much like the mid-nineteenth century as the newest colleges in the nation once again took on the task of implementing change in the mission of higher education. The community colleges, built at an unprecedented rate throughout the 1950's and 60's, were established in the interest of social justice and equal opportunity. The most urgent need of the nation was no longer to educate an intellectual elite for positions of leadership, but to deal with growing social problems through the education of the masses.

Much as the meritocracy had questioned the assumption that family position entitled one to an education, so egalitarianism challenged the meritocratic assumption that an education was won through academic competition. True to their egalitarian mission, the community colleges were distinctively non-competitive. Admission was open to all; scholarships were based on financial need rather than on academic performance; there were no sororities or fraternities, no big time football, no faculty prima donnas competing for national visibility through research and publications.

Change is always hard, and perhaps it is especially difficult in education because faculty have usually come from the cream of the crop of a previous era. The faculty of my generation, for example, grew up in meritocratic homes, and we did all our early learning in meritocratic schools and colleges. Deep somewhere within the learning of our past lies the unshaken conviction that quality rises to the top through competition. It is difficult for most of the faculty members of my generation to see quality in the non-competitive atmosphere of the community colleges. But let us remember that the same phenomenon was present when the aristocrats of an earlier era looked upon the riff-raff of the meritocracy. To the aristocrat, quality was a matter of breeding. "You can take the boy off the farm and send him to college, but you can't take the farm off the boy" was a familiar putdown of the new breed of college students of my parent's generation.

The fourth phase of American higher education--the age of consumerism--began around 1970. Consumerism was sparked by the sudden change in supply

and demand between colleges and students. From the sellers' market of the 1950's in which students had to please colleges in order to be selected, we moved almost suddenly, to the buyers' market of the 1970's in which colleges have to please students in order to be selected.

The Commission on Non-Traditional Study, in its report, Diversity by Design captured the philosophy of consumerism when it called for a new attitude in higher education which "puts the student first and the institution second, concentrates more on the former's need than the latter's convenience, encourages diversity of individual opportunity rather than uniform prescription, and deemphasizes time, space and even course requirements in favor of competence and where applicable performance. . . ." (Commission on Non-Traditional Study, 1973, p. xv).

The age of consumerism is the last frontier of the growth model. Seeking new clientele to fill the seats left vacant by the dwindling supply of 18 to 24 year olds, colleges are now actively recruiting adult part-time learners.

The adult education movement rises naturally out of the egalitarian thrust that has characterized higher education all along. Once community colleges were established within commuting distance of almost everyone, it was a natural step to remove age as the last remaining barrier to educational opportunity. This final step in the evolutionary process of educational change through expansion of student groups

carries society's message, dimly perceived as yet, that higher education is no longer charged with the mission of selecting and preparing an elite group of young people to be the leaders of tomorrow. Rather, the new mission is to help all citizens cope with the demands of living in a complicated society and to improve the quality of life through education. Higher education--institutionally and as a national enterprise--has very little experience with that mission.

Expansion of the curriculum has followed essentially the same pattern as growth in enrollments. As enrollments grew by including new segments of the population, so curricula expanded by adding new fields of study. The land grant movement expanded the classical curriculum to include the applied subjects of agriculture and the mechanical arts; community colleges expanded the interpretation of "applied" to include vocational subjects such as auto mechanics and cosmetology. Adult education goes beyond vocational courses to add avocational subjects to the curriculum.

The problems of the bloated curriculum have been exacerbated by the explosion of knowledge within each course of study. Instead of academic disciplines fragmented only to the extent that experimental psychologists share no common vocabulary with which to converse with clinical psychologists, we are rapidly approaching the point where the subbranches of clinical psychology have almost nothing in common. Libraries are moving from shelving bulky books to storing microfiche to pondering a new technological version of the old philosophical question, how many books can be stored on the head of a pin?

And so educational change based on growth and expansion is ending. The growth in students has reached its natural end. At least I cannot think of any segment of the population not already identified as a target for educational opportunity which will provide further impetus for change.

The question of the continued expansion of the curriculum is more controversial. Theoretically, I suppose, there is no absolute limit to the disciplinary specialities that can be added to the curriculum. In my view, however, an educational model that aims to pass along the heritage of human knowledge in the form of subject matter content is rapidly reaching the point of practical absurdity. It may be time to return to an examination of the promises made in college catalogues. Those promises include teaching people to think for themselves, to develop a system of values, and to become self-directed lifelong learners. Yet most colleges do not even try to do those things. They teach subject matter and sometimes they measure the results in terms of the student's grasp of subject matter content that is rapidly outdated and even more rapidly forgotten.

The expansion of campus boundaries has also been characterized by the old familiar growth model for change. From the small residential liberal arts campuses of the aristocracy, we moved to the massive campuses of the land grant universities. The community colleges then extended the concept of campus beyond the quadrangle of college buildings to include community as campus. The non-traditional

consumer movement has completed the evolutionary expansion of college campuses, culminating in the university without walls which advocates the use of the world as campus.

What does higher education do for an encore when we teach all of the subjects to all of the learners using the world as our campus? The education of the future will be different in kind rather than different in degree from the education we have known.

Clark Kerr (1977, p. 41) has made the interesting prediction that nothing much is going to happen to change higher education until the year 2000 since, "higher education is tenured in by its faculty and walled in by its physical plant for the next quarter century." Dr. Kerr's prediction is based on the experiences of the past, which indicate that growth is the inducer of change. All of the major change throughout the history of higher education in this country has been brought about through establishing new institutions and bringing in new people to do a new job. We have not generally been very successful in teaching old dogs new tricks. We did not try to convert Harvard or Yale to teach agriculture and engineering, for example. We established the land grant institutions. The fact that Harvard and Yale later joined the meritocracy in the pursuit of applied research proves only that major change can be copied, not that it is often started by existing establishments. Likewise, we did not try to convert the land grant institutions, which over the years had grown increasingly selective, to the mission of open admissions. We established community colleges with new faculty and new purposes.

Dr. Kerr may be right in his assumption that growth accompanied by new people and new institutions is necessary for change. My assumption about change is different, however. I believe that because educational institutions are the creations of society that external pressures create change in social institutions. By and large, regardless of opportunity, institutions do not reform themselves unless they are very uncomfortable with their existing situation. At the present time, I think there is enough discomfort in academe to predict change rather than no change over the next 25 years. While many in the establishment hope that the change will be a return to the good old days when students learned what professors felt comfortable teaching, I cannot think of much social change that has returned to earlier times. Somehow the old answers are never appropriate for the new questions. For example, although there are some faculty who would, if they could, return to more selective admissions, somehow that is not the problem any more--at least not for society. The problem now is perceived to reside in the exit standards of prior educational efforts rather than in the entrance requirements for further opportunity. The solution to that problem seems to call for improving teaching and learning rather than for improving admissions tests and tightening up on selection. Improving the psychometric properties of admissions tests and raising the criteria for admission were meritocratic answers to the problem of students who could not read at the college level.

While my particular perspective on higher education is concerned with national missions rather than with local institutional goals,

the history of Mills College could probably be written as a constant interplay between the forces of society and the responses of an established institution. It is my undocumented observation that new institutions, established in tune with the national educational priorities of the times, usually have a clearer, more united sense of mission and purpose than older institutions which are constantly subjected to debating the merits of incremental change. For example, while community colleges today typically have a rather clear and united sense of mission, established institutions are coping with never-ending decisions about what to do, if anything, about adapting to the changing needs of society.

It seems to me that taking a position at either extreme on the change continuum will probably be self-defeating for Mills College. Those who insist that Mills should not change on the grounds that there will always be some market for a good program that offers stability and quality through periods of social change are ignoring the strong interdependence between society and its educational institutions. On the other hand, those who advocate institutional realignment to every new social mission that comes along are ignoring strengths developed through experience and the recruitment of an appropriate faculty.

As must be obvious by this time, my personal agenda for your discussions this afternoon--and probably into the foreseeable future--would be to seek the most favorable balance between the changing

needs and priorities of society and the strengths and experience of Mills College. Let me make it clear, however, that I am an unabashed advocate of change. I am not convinced that higher education has found the right--or even very good answers--to the education of the American public. And I am convinced that the faculty or the institution that is excessively conservative with respect to change is doomed to a frustrating and depressing existence in a world in which change is an escalating reality. Personally, I think the question for Mills over the next decade is not really whether to change what you are presently doing. Rather, it is a matter of figuring out which changes will build on the special strengths of Mills, while at the same time serving the changing needs of society.

You know better than I the history and strengths of Mills College. The purpose that I can serve is to point to some specific national educational priorities and trends that you will need to consider as you debate new directions for Mills College over the next five to ten years. I shall direct my attention to issues that I perceive to be most relevant to a small liberal arts college for women.

Everyone knows, of course, about the imminent arrival of the steady state, followed by a national decline in college enrollments. How great the decline will be and precisely when it will hit depends a little on whom you read. Most projections seem to agree that nationally, higher education can expect modest increases in enrollments for the remainder of the 1970's; followed by a slow decline in the early

1980's, followed by a sharp drop in the mid- to late 1980's, rising again slowly in the last decade of this century. The impact of these demographic projections will be differentially felt by different kinds of institutions.

The greatest growth in student populations is occurring, and will probably continue to occur, among part-time students and among students over the age of 21. (Half of all college students today are over the age of 21 and part-time students already outnumber full-time students.) Enrollments among women and ethnic minorities are also increasing more rapidly than the national average. Institutions in the most favorable position regarding future enrollment trends are large, public, urban institutions offering a variety of career-oriented programs to part-time adult learners. Thus, odd's makers would grant Mills pluses for its urban location and its experience with the education of women, and handicaps for its private (i.e., high tuition) liberal arts orientation.

One obvious suggestion to which I'm sure you have addressed yourselves, and will continue to debate, is the extent to which Mills should attempt to recruit and serve ethnic minorities and older women returning to college. Both of these groups exist in great profusion in the Bay Area. More controversial than whether Mills should attempt to attract these growing student markets, I suppose, is the question of how.

Nationally, colleges are using three basic approaches to the recruitment of adult students: 1) They are putting more effort into public relations, advertising and recruitment. 2) They are extending student services to adults and creating more flexible schedules and new academic procedures. 3) They are designing new curricular programs to meet the special needs of adult learners.

Notice that these three distinguishable approaches to the recruitment of adult learners form a continuum of commitment on the part of the total institution. A college can accomplish stepped-up, targeted recruitment efforts through the dedication of the admission office, aided perhaps by some student, faculty, and alumnae speeches here and there. This approach calls for almost no basic change on the part of the college. It assumes that adults want what the college has been offering for years to 17 and 18 year olds--an assumption that has very dubious validity. Most colleges using only this approach do so by default. They are unable to marshal enough commitment to launch a more attractive program for new kinds of markets.

The second approach to serving adult part-time learners is certainly the most common in the 1970's. A majority of the colleges in the country now offer a wide range of administrative services and scheduling conveniences for adults. A national survey of colleges and universities conducted in 1972 found over 1000 non-traditional programs, most geared to serving adults, most off-campus, and most established since 1970. Almost all had abolished tuition policies which discriminate against

part-time students, most offered extended hours for the use of library, student lounges, cafeterias, bookstores and the like; two-thirds offered credit by examination; and one-half offered credit for various kinds of non-collegiate learning experiences, such as cooperative work experience, volunteer work in a community agency, completion of a book, sculpture, patent and the like. Only 10 percent offered child care and only 22 percent offered health services at hours when evening and weekend students could benefit (Ruyle and Geiselman, 1974).

For both options One and Two, the modifications to accommodate adult learners involve largely administrative procedures, but option Two begins to involve faculty--in the modification of credit policies, for example.

National data show that from two-thirds to three-fourths of the so-called non-traditional programs launched by colleges and universities within the past five years involve serving new kinds of students or establishing new locations and class schedules. Changes in instructional methods or curricular content have been less popular so far, affecting only about half of the non-traditional programs (Ruyle and Geiselman, 1974). In other words, most colleges today are eager to recruit adult students to rather traditional college courses. There is less commitment to the design of new curricular and instructional approaches for adults--basically faculty activities.

Looking ahead five to ten years, I suspect there will be major and widespread changes in faculty as well as administrative activities

with respect to adult learners. Quite candidly, I think if I were planning for the future of Mills College and if I were convinced that the education of returning women constituted a major interest of the college, I would begin now to look beyond relatively easy administrative modifications toward some basic changes in curriculum and instruction.

There may be enough women in the Bay Area, older as well as younger, who want a traditional liberal arts education to suggest that a significant market can be tapped through stepped-up recruiting efforts plus some administrative modifications. But there is ample competition in the Bay Area, and learners are already doing some fairly sophisticated shopping for the programs and services that best meet their needs. A study recently conducted for the California State Legislature, concluded that the single greatest need for adult learners in California was for better consumer information about existing educational opportunities (Peterson and Hefferlin, 1975). Educators, as well as federal and state governments nationwide, are showing increasing interest in establishing brokerage services for adults. These are informational and counseling services that put people who want to learn in touch with appropriate educational experiences. As consumer information improves, educational competition will shift from sales to services, i.e., from recruitment to curricular planning.

Curricular planning for adult students is a rather different process from planning for traditional college students. Young people

learn more or less what they are told to learn because they are oriented to learning for future use. But adults are usually learning for needs that they have identified, and the curriculum will have to meet these focused needs.

Research to date on the interests of adult learners indicates that adults as a group are highly pragmatic and vocationally oriented. Interest in traditional discipline-oriented liberal arts courses is typically quite low on the list of adult learning priorities, and research suggests that the main interest in liberal arts education is more for the credential than for so-called liberal learning--even on the part of mature learners. Adult learners who feel they can afford the luxury of liberal learning for personal and cultural enrichment are more likely to be found in non-credit courses dealing with social issues and the use of leisure time than in traditional liberal arts courses.

On the other hand, the interest in general education in California is double that for the nation as a whole. For example, 7 percent of California adults are interested in studying foreign languages, compared to only 2 percent nationally, and 5 percent want to study the social sciences, compared to 1 percent or less nationally (Hefferlin, Peterson, and Roelfs, 1975). California adults, being relatively well-educated already, are also more degree-oriented than the national average. Twelve percent of adult women in California express interest in a bachelor's degree, and as one would expect, degree interest is

highest among those who started college but failed to complete degrees; 27 percent of California adults (both men and women) with some college would like to pursue a bachelor's degree, compared to 5 percent of those with only a high school diploma.

The major barriers to further education cited by adults who have some college--which would seem to be the most likely market for a Mills degree--are cost, job and home responsibilities, and lack of appropriate class scheduling. Child care problems, and the lack of courses that are interesting and practical are also cited by significant numbers of adults who say they are interested in further education (Hefferlin, Peterson, and Roelfs, 1975).

While data from adult needs assessments may provide helpful clues regarding what adults say they want, adult learners are by and large tied-to-the-present in their desires. Part of the success of planning for the next five to ten years lies, not solely in gearing up to provide what adult learners want now, but in predicting what they will need for the future, and in keeping a careful eye on rapidly expanding alternatives. The pedagogical sophistication of some of the new technologies--software as well as hardware--is not comprehended by the average adult learner, and is passed off too quickly by many educators as "1984 stuff". But let us remember that 1984 is what we are talking about. And higher education will be very different in 1984 from what it was in 1974.

Time does not permit more detailed analysis of the viability of various Mills alternatives. I have analyzed one possible future

direction for Mills College rather sketchily--not because it is necessarily the direction you will decide to take--but to illustrate the process of change as a function of a combination of societal needs and institutional history. Although I directed considerable attention in the first half of my message this morning to the substantial change that has already occurred in higher education, most of that change has been accomplished through establishing new institutions and recruiting new faculty to do new things. Those options are now closed, and old institutions are going to have to do new things. The key to the kind of change that I think is needed now lies primarily with the faculty, supported by administrative leadership and facilitation. I am convinced that an "instructional revolution" lies in the future of higher education (Cross, 1976). It will involve fundamental change in the activities of college faculty members, and it is already well underway in some colleges and in the educational periphery consisting of industry, mass media, and government and community agencies. The competition to provide educational services will be fierce in the next five to ten years, and the college that can get its act together and find new solutions to new needs will serve its students well.

I hope your continuing discussions regarding the future of Mills College will be both stimulating and profitable.

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