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## **Influencing K-12 and Higher Education Nationally and Internationally**

### **Title**

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Excellence and Institutional Mission:  
Focusing on Quality

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EXCELLENCE AND INSTITUTIONAL MISSION:  
FOCUSING ON QUALITY

1. Appointment of National Commission on Excellence in Education.
  - a. Charge--fact sheet
  - b. Membership--sample
  - c. Procedure--hearings
  - d. Timing--announcement
  - e. To whom addressed
  - f. Implementation
  
2. The term "excellence" in education generally and in higher education in particular tends too often to connote the existence of a single norm or standard to which individuals and institutions seem somehow obliged to strive, e.g. in the case of higher education institutions, to be included as a world-class university in the contemporary sense of the term, is to have achieved the only kind of educational excellence there is around.

The idea of a single norm of excellence, or a more complex variation of this idea, such as a single norm within major types of institutions, has had a significant influence on the development of institutions of higher education and tends, I believe, to make some of our problems more complicated and resistant to resolution than they need to be.

I believe that excellence in a school or in an institution of higher education is more a function of how well the purpose or mission of a particular school or college is discharged than how that institution compares with other institutions which arise out of our propensity to ascribe excellence to a single standard.

3. Evolution of Institutional Purposes/Missions

To make this point, albeit imperfectly, we need to recall that the nation has experienced unparalleled growth in the number and types of colleges and universities over the last century; and this dramatic growth is without reference to the comparable changes that have occurred among the students who have enrolled in these institutions and their reasons for doing so:

a.	1869-70	563	institutions	52,000	students
b.	1919-20	1,041	"	600,000	"
c.	1959-60	2,008	"	3,216,000	"
d.	1969-70	2,528	"	7,500,000	"
e.	1981	3,200	"	12,000,000	"

In 1910, there were 264 normal schools enrolling 132,000. They comprized one-third of the nation's total higher education enrollments.

Normal schools had their beginnings largely as the result of the missionary zeal of the likes of Horace Mann, who in the 1830's and 1840's successfully argued for common, or elementary, schools for all children. The phenomenal growth of elementary schools led inevitably to the need for teachers to staff these schools.

Gradually, the notion that teachers should be possessed of subject-matter, academic training in addition to pedagogical training won acceptance, thus effecting a transformation of many normal schools into teacher colleges.

If one examine's the historical roots of institutions now affiliated with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, one finds that:

- a. 59% began as normal schools (another 14% started as agricultural or technical institutions).
- b. 10% started as state colleges.
- c. 8% as junior colleges.
- d. 6% as academics or seminaries.
- e. 3% as religious schools or YMCA's.

The evolutionary pattern of the normal schools is reasonably clear: the normal school, founded to prepare elementary school teachers, becomes a teachers college to prepare secondary as well as elementary school teachers. As states respond to increasing demands for higher education, the teachers college expands its function and enlarges its enrollment and curriculum to become a multi-purpose state college and, in some instances, a university. This tendency for institutions of one kind to evolve into institutions of another came to be called "academic drift".

By the early 50's to mid 60's, "academic drift" had become a not uncommon pattern throughout the country, particularly among state supported institutions of higher education.

Bud Hodgkinson's 1970 study of 1,230 institutions entitled Institutions in Transition reported that between 1949 and 1966 there was, for example, (a) a major decline in the number of state-controlled institutions awarding the bachelor of arts as the final degree awarded by such institutions; and (b) a major increase in state controlled institutions offering the M.A., M.S., Ph.D., and graduate level professional degrees of various kinds.

The reasons for this "academic drift", evident both in this country and in countries such as Great Britain, where teachers colleges became polytechnics and polytechnics became universities, are diverse but tend to be mutually reinforcing.

What have been the underlying forces that gave life to this situation? One study of institutions that moved from two-year

to four-year status lists the following influential factors (Schroder, 1967):

- a. an authentic belief in the need for the proposed programs.
- b. a desire for enhanced institutional prestige and standing.
- c. the prospect of increased enrollment and financial support endorsing the change.
- d. local community support endorsing the change.
- e. encouragement from consultants.
- f. support from local political leaders.
- g. the growth and development of competing, or thought to be competing, institutions.

This evolution of institutions and their mission and type has in recent years been slowed because of declining growth rates in much of the country, fiscal problems (often of a very severe kind) brought on by expenditures and tax limitation measures, recession, diminished public confidence which arose out of the student unrest of the 1960's and early 1970's and a saturation of the market by institutions becoming more rather than less alike.

Many institutions have, as a result, been caught mid-stream in their evolutionary development. This fact has profound educational, fiscal and institutional implications.

The two-year college that became a four-year college is often still in the process of trying to fill out academic program majors and providing more depth in the upper division curriculum.

Faced with at best, stable, or more likely declining real resources, should such an institution opt to expand into more popular offerings, such as two-year vocational programs, or instead, attempt to fulfill its original aspirations of fleshing out upper-division strength through some form of continued growth?

Should a fledgling university which earlier initiated programmatic growth across a wide variety of fronts attempt to maintain its breadth while striving qualitatively to enhance its depth or should it constrict its range of programs in order to realize authentic capability and competence in a reduced but better balanced and more promising program by a focusing rather than a spreading of resources?

Bud Hodgkinson's case study of an emerging university in the midwest in the late 1960's revealed issues that are as lively today as they were then.

One respondent in this case summed up their situation as follows:

"...Partly because of generous financing, the institution has grown too rapidly on too many fronts, and, essentially without priorities, has been too

many things to too many people. Now that we are faced with a real budget squeeze for a while, indiscriminate growth has caught us short. We are going to suffer for some time the pains of faculty expectations we will never be able to meet..."

So many of our institutions did expand rapidly over a broad array of academic fronts, hoping eventually to achieve both the breadth and depth needed to secure genuine university or comprehensive college status--quality and excellence of programs often became less of a primary concern in such situations than did mere growth itself.

#### 4. Purposes and Excellence

Spinoza has quite rightly observed that "All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare."

It is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve real excellence in anything, not to speak of everything, we as individuals or as institutions undertake to do. As a general proposition, the more we are willing to take on, at least after a certain point, the less, it seems to me, are our chances of achieving excellence in selected areas much less across the board. The homogenization of much of higher education in the country and the press toward uniformity in the schools coupled with the increasing array of educational purposes our institutions have embraced or have been obliged to assume tends to endanger standards of excellence and educational quality, as educators generally understand these terms and ideas.

Twenty years ago, then Secretary of HEW, John W. Gardner, appealed to institutions of higher education to achieve excellence in terms of their own uniquely defined objectives. This message is worth reaffirming today. It is in some respects more pertinent today than when Secretary Gardner stated it two decades ago. The admonition should be our guide for the 80's, for it is on the issue of educational quality and institutional excellence that our educational institutions will obtain or lose public confidence together with the resources that will be forthcoming if we possess that confidence or those that we will lose if that confidence is further eroded.

5. As many institutions face the possibility and prospect of declining enrollment (the extent of which varies by region in the country and is a much disputed matter) there will be self-evident institutional incentives to downplay or postpone plans and policies which tend to embody more rigorous academic standards, especially for admission if such higher standards are perceived as risking enrollment loss or fiscal prejudice.

There may also prove to be a hesitancy to pursue institutional strategies of anything other than expanding the comprehensiveness of programmatic offerings irrespective of the impact of such

growth on educational quality. The success of the comprehensive institution has, after all, been reflected in the evolution of institutions of higher education cited earlier.

The institutional dilemma, of course, is this--whether (a) to be increasingly comprehensive in order to broaden program appeal to students and to the political and geographic constituencies that grow up around such an effort as a means of securing the fiscal resources needed to maintain the enterprise or (b) to the more distinctive and less comprehensive in defining the scope of academic and support programs in order to concentrate more or less, thus, hopefully, fitting available and prospective resources to one's intended mission in the belief that quality will always draw its own influence and fiscal support irrespective of scale.

While the dichotomous nature of this dilemma is oversimplified for purposes of brevity and illustration, the basic policy issue is of central importance both to perceptions of institutional survival and to the quality of education our institutions will offer.

Having chartered a course to become comprehensive, how really feasibly or realistic is it to seek a fundamental change in direction; particularly in uncertain waters and with a ship whose crew thought they were headed for one continent only to find that they are headed for another.

Institutions, of course, do occasionally make radical shifts in their missions and directions. The strategy, of course, hinges on our knowing exactly what change one intends to make and why.

A reported example of this strategy is the Detroit Institution of Technology where, I understand, two-thirds of the programs were reduced, merged, or eliminated in an effort to focus available resources on becoming an outstanding technical institution and to do so by shedding many of the nontechnical but, nevertheless, important programs that had been developed over the years.

The risks of developing such a strategy are self-evident:

- a. specialist institutions tend to fluctuate more with the market of the particular specialties and thus run the uncertainty of being in or out of favor as regards the bulk of their work, at any given period of time.
- b. the faculty of a particular institution may so resist a more distinct and narrowly defined role as to render the outcome far from certain or to disturb the institution's inner morale and elan beyond repair.

The more typical case is an institution that has moved toward comprehensiveness but does not at the moment have the faculty, students, or financial resources to fulfill its avowed goal and intended purposes but wishes to sustain its long-term comprehensive character but without the resources to do so. One may note that a strong case can be made for sustaining the more comprehensive rather than the more specialized pattern. A recent study by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) on enrollment decline during the period 1976 to 1979 found that the incidence of decline occurred less frequently in major doctoral granting institutions, followed by comprehensive senior institutions, general baccalaureate institutions, specialized institutions and finally two-year institutions.

6. I believe we are at an important juncture in the evolution of an educational ethos in American higher education. Over the past three decades our concentration on open entry and increased access, while indispensable to the encouragement of those historically discouraged from pursuing schooling through the secondary school and into higher education (an unfinished national agenda), has caused us to focus less upon standards of excellence in elementary, secondary and post-secondary education than can be justified or defended. While having made major gains in opening our schools, colleges and universities to those citizens who have historically been less fully represented, we have paid less committed and concerned attention to the quality of the education these young people have been offered once they have gained access than, in retrospect, we should have.

I am not unaware of why this has occurred and I do not intend to fix the burden of responsibility on any one group in our society or on those whose daily task it is to confront the immediary of the educational, fiscal, social and political problems that attend schooling in America.

Nevertheless, the issues now coming to the fore are increasingly those of articulation of institutional purpose and clarity of institutional expectations and standards. Colleges and universities, for example, and, at best, have been giving prospective students mixed signals as to the necessity and nature of academic preparation and the standards for retention when once enrolled. This, in turn, has had, in my opinion, a measurable and adverse impact on student choice in high school and on the ability of the schools to wisely and successfully counsel students who are intending to pursue their studies beyond high school.

We have, therefore, more willingly than was wise, accommodated ill-prepared students by means of a dramatic increase in what we have come to call remedial classes at the post-secondary level, even at our better universities. This not only diverts scarce resources to programs that are by definition non-college on university level, but worse, it enables the student to slip through high school with relative ease and without any

real perceived damage to his or her academic program just as it weakens the high schools' capacity properly to counsel these students and to help their parents help their children.

Educational quality and excellence suffer, therefore, in two respects: (a) in a relaxed and less demanding high school program than is appropriate and (b) in a softening of standards at our universities and colleges. The public's perception of this circumstance may not be fully informed one, but it is felt, nevertheless, and, accounts, at least in part, for much of the criticism one hears so much about today regarding the quality of schooling in America. John Gardner long ago observed:

"We cannot have islands of excellence in a sea of slovenly indifference to standards. In an era when the masses of people were mute and powerless it may have been possible for a tiny minority to maintain high standards regardless of their surroundings. But today the masses of people are neither mute nor powerless. As consumers, as voters, as the source of public opinion, they heavily influence levels of taste and performance. They can create a climate supremely inimical to standards of any sort."

And, one might add, a climate conclusive to and supportive of standards. It is my opinion that the time is quite ripe for the schools, colleges, and universities, working more closely and cooperatively than they are inherently wanting to do, to tap the reservoir of public opinion today that is crying out for educational programs that will truly prepare young people to compete and to function in our society, and to exact from them what they are capable of giving, those among our students of more limited promise as well as those of holding greater promise. We should be clearer in our own minds about the kinds of institutions we serve--what they can do well and what they should not be asked to do because they can do them only poorly.

But above all we should seek to fit our avowed purposes with what we are in fact capable of delivering at a level of excellence that permits us to live with our most inner professional selves and which accords the students entrusted to our care with the quality of teaching and educational opportunity they deserve and, in my opinion, very much want. If we are able to do so, we will be making some programmatic adjustments in our institutions, mostly of a constricting kind, but in doing so enhancing the quality of our remaining effort which, in my opinion, will gradually check and then hopefully reverse the downward spiral we presently find ourselves in with the public saying, in effect, "ask me for no more money because we are not presently getting worth for what we now spend" and the schools, colleges, and universities, saying, in effect, "ask us for no more quality, because we can't get it with what you now give us." That conversation is going nowhere. The initiative for change is our burden; and if we do it wisely, institution

by institution, holding firm to what we say we can do and  
do well and resisting the taking on of what we do less well  
and that which would merely further spread scarce resources.  
then excellence and quality will gradually emerge in ways  
that will in turn give rise to the resources needed to carry  
on our work. While some may suggest that this is a vain hope,  
I can only respond by saying that it is at least a more promising  
one than the contemplation of business as usual in the 1980's.