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Diversity of Institutional Goals

Too many of the institutions that are changing their roles—typically but by no means exclusively the state teachers colleges that are becoming state colleges or universities—seem to see only one proper model to follow: the great, complex university. They hope to become Harvards, or Berkeleys, or Michigans, or Chicagos.

Many of the institutions on this overcrowded bandwagon will fall off. There are not enough scholars in chemistry or sociology or history to staff first-rate departments in all the institutions that are hunting the formula for Instant Harvard. Accelerators, observatories, great research libraries, and some other specialized facilities cost too much to be placed in every college town. In some fields the critical number of scholars and assistants and the variety of supporting equipment and facilities needed to achieve excellence seem to be increasing, a trend that leads to concentration in fewer centers rather than division among more.

Some universities will make the grade, and the country will be benefited by the increase. But what of those that are going to fail?

They need some dignified alternatives. We need to foster the development of diverse criteria of excellence so that, with realistic appreciation of their own special situations, different institutions can strive toward different goals instead of all trying to head in the same direction. Fortunately, there are enough examples in existence to give hope that there can be more.

One opportunity lies in specialization. Cal Tech is not a universal university; it just tries to be the very best in its chosen fields. Why should not a few institutions strive for comparable quality in the social sciences or the humanities, without worrying about astronomy or engineering?

A few bold institutions could decide to emphasize some relatively unpopular or neglected fields, in which a position of high standing might be achieved quickly. Mechanical engineering and systematic biology are still important, even though they have been living in the shadow of currently more glamorous fields. On a campus where these were the most prestigious departments, they would attract more of the best students.

There are other kinds of specialization. A few college presidents want their institutions to continue to be first-rate liberal arts colleges or to concentrate on training teachers for elementary and secondary schools. There is opportunity for educational excellence in these important areas.

Another opportunity lies in much greater interinstitutional cooperation. Regional compacts, state plans for higher education, and a variety of voluntary arrangements should be encouraged to go farther than they have as yet. Paul Weiss has argued that no single university can any longer hope to be a universal university, and that all must group themselves into communities of universities and colleges. Within such a community each institution could take pride in the accomplishments of the whole and in its contribution to that whole.

To increase the attractiveness of these alternative routes to eminence will require both changes in attitudes among educators and some different formulas for distributing funds. Most of the federal money for higher education is so administered as to put a premium on size, number of students, amount of research, or other characteristics of the big university. Other criteria could be used, but they should be deliberately planned to encourage other lines of development. Simply changing the geographic distribution or increasing the amount in order to be able to lower requirements will not do the job. The more diverse educational goals should be encouraged because they are praiseworthy in their own right, not as consolation prizes.—DAEL WOLFLE