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SCIENCE

Can Success Be the Cause of Failure?*

It is natural for us all to ask the age-old question: Are our educational policies and procedures really adapted to the world of today? The answer is always "No." Education is not for today; it is *of* the past and it is *for* the future. When, as in ages past, times are changing slowly, then the past, the present, and the future merge into one continuous pattern. In times of rapid change, however, the present appears to be a discontinuity between the past and the future, and no educational policy seems adequate to bridge the gap. Hence, turmoil would seem to be an inevitable characteristic of a rapidly changing world, and an educational system not in turmoil would be one that is surely dead.

The ghastly disruptions and grisly scenes of violence which have taken place on some campuses have been a searing experience for those who have devoted their lives to the development of excellence in American higher education. Despite its faults, our educational system gives more and better opportunities to more young people than any other system in existence—or in the history of civilization. Never, and nowhere, have the opportunities and the fruits of learning been so widely available, so widely utilized, and so widely appreciated.

One must inevitably conclude that the troubles of today are attributable not to the failures of our university system, but to its successes. It has brought higher education to 50 percent of our young people. Why not 100 percent? It has brought scholarly inquiry to bear on a host of areas of human concern. Why not on *all*? Scholarship and research have shed light on many problems which have puzzled the human intellect. Why are some problems still unsolved? Why is it we can understand the structure of the universe and not the structure of human society—or of the human brain or heart?

Because higher education has been so successful in so many areas, it is now said to be a colossal failure because success is not yet visible in *every* sphere of human concern. A few hundred years ago no one understood anything about the nature of the universe—and everyone was apparently happy. Today we are overwhelmed with knowledge—and we scream with pain because we don't know everything.

Once our colleges taught almost nothing except Latin, Greek, philosophy, theology, and jurisprudence—and they were regarded as the pinnacles of civilization. Today they teach everything that the human mind has learned—and are accused of living in the Middle Ages.

Success has thus led only to rising expectations and to mounting accusations of failure.

Or so it seems.

And yet—there are 6 million students now in college, and more are seeking admission each year. Americans are spending $15 billion a year on higher education, and—unless the calamity-howlers prevail—this will increase by 10 percent or more per year. More people want more education; more people want to teach in colleges and universities; the nation appreciates more (and demands more) of higher education in each successive year.

American higher education is in fact zooming ahead to new heights of achievement—even though a small minority of faculty, students, and citizens denounce its weaknesses and blame the universities for all the ills of a troubled world.

Imperfections there are. It is hard to keep pace with a rapidly changing world. These imperfections are going to be cured—not by wrecking but by improving the structure which carries the torch of learning, the torch of civilization, on to future generations.

—LEE A. DUBRIDGE

* Adapted from "The President's Report and Reports of Other Officers, 1967/1968" (*Bulletin of the California Institute of Technology*, Pasadena, 1968).