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Whither the New Public Urban University

Since World War II several state universities have established major urban campuses. These institutions are destined to differ markedly from the older state universities predating the urban crisis.

These new public urban campuses were designed by the faculties of established institutions as near replicas of the older campuses. The organizers recruited faculty members who, like themselves, had solid credentials in the liberal disciplines and professions and expected to participate in productive scholarship and strong graduate programs. The designers erected libraries, union buildings, and classrooms in proportions similar to those on existing campuses. In acknowledgement of the urban locations, they sometimes appended colleges of urban affairs or departments of ethnic studies onto otherwise familiar patterns.

That design has not proved adequate to the urban challenge partly because the students on these new public campuses represent different strata of American society than do the students on the parent campuses. The family incomes of students on the urban campuses are less than those of students on the established campuses. The urban students spend more time in remunerative employment and in commuting and have little remaining for athletics or production of student newspapers. The cultural environments of the two kinds of campuses differ accordingly.

Urban campus students are primarily commuters, usually living with parents, whereas those on the established campuses live in dormitories, fraternity houses, or other quarters away from parents. Typical residential campus opportunities for interactions with peers (extracurriculars, dormitories, fraternities) rarely are available to urban students who seriously overcrowd the available union buildings. But for commuter campuses, where students would spend only part of a day, the designers must have felt that union buildings of conventional size would be more than adequate.

Urban undergraduates evince little interest in urban studies or other nontraditional curricula. Far fewer of their parents attended college and many, if not most, arrive on campus with a limited view of the options of higher education. They come to college not seeking a liberal education but to enter conventional careers—to become accountants, physicians, teachers, lawyers, architects.

In addition to other important and significant obligations of the new public urban institutions, they must meet the current needs of this different study body. Can today's faculty members with a strong commitment to traditional higher education and a strong affection for residential campuses provide the requisite leadership for the reorientation of the public urban universities?

I think the answer is yes. A little more than a century ago faculty members with a strong commitment to theological and classical studies participated effectively in developing pragmatic agricultural and engineering programs with noteworthy, though different, standards of excellence. The public urban universities' potential contributions are no less important. For those potentialities to become realities, a reassessment of strategies and goals is imperative. To recognize that the public urban universities of tomorrow will differ as much from their progenitors as the land grant colleges of the 1860's did from theirs is an important ingredient in that reassessment. The successful leaders of these new urban campuses will be those who understand the legitimacy of that difference and are prepared to encourage the requisite fundamental changes.—Arnold B. Grobman, Special Assistant to the President, University of Illinois, Box 4348, Chicago 60680