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Big University—Humane or Bureaucratic?

Modern science is frequently referred to as Big Science because of its large-scale character. Similarly, the term Big University might be used to describe today's large and powerful universities. The Big University is new enough that many of us still tend to think in terms of its predecessor when, in fact, it is a new institution with its own role to play and its own problems to solve.

With its roots in the past and its future not clearly defined, the Big University finds itself in the midst of conflicting influences and demands. Many of the problem-solving approaches that served well in the past are no longer useful, but new ideas have been slow to come forth. Attempts at solutions have been piecemeal—specific problems being dealt with as they arise and largely in the context of an enlarged version of the familiar Little University. This has often led to further growth of an already overgrown administrative superstructure and large-scale bureaucratization of the institution. In an age of diminishing financial resources, a larger and larger proportion of academic salaries is being spent on administration, rapidly creating a situation in which the support functions take precedence over the primary mission of education.

The problems of the Big University require more than short-term thinking. Traditional humanistic values and practices have to be reconciled with changing societal goals and priorities, the growth of knowledge, increased specialization, government involvement, and a whole range of other issues. What needs to be done and what should be preserved?

There seems to be general agreement about the need for improved fiscal controls and operational efficiency. But evaluating the efficiency of an institution of higher education raises some fundamental questions, related to the extent to which the educational process lends itself to quantitative measurement. Methods that work well for other types of organizations have only limited applicability. From the systems point of view, for example, efficiency may be measured in terms of the value of the output of the system compared to input costs. In a university, where both input and output are predominantly intellectual in nature, they can not be readily quantified. Attempts to use this approach lead to deceptively simple solutions, which often show an inadequate understanding of the educational process.

Academic practices designed to ensure scholarly excellence and intellectual independence need to be strengthened to retain their usefulness in the Big University environment. One of these practices is peer evaluation, the traditional method used to determine scholarly worth. Specialization and the trend toward interdisciplinary departments make it increasingly difficult to identify valid peer groups within an academic administrative unit. As a result, what should be an evaluation by a peer group often becomes an evaluation by colleagues in other fields. This tends to make the method vulnerable to competitiveness, professional jealousy, and personal likes and dislikes, creating a politically charged campus atmosphere that stifles creativity and leads to intellectual mediocrity.

There is a need for renewed—or even revived—recognition of the vital relationship between scholarship and good teaching. Good teaching represents the synthesis and integration of a wide range of intellectual experiences and activities and cannot be described exclusively in terms of method and time spent. Frequently, failure of the professional bureaucrat to recognize this relationship really reflects his latent anti-intellectual attitudes. Nevertheless, we should be able to intelligently reconcile the intangibles related to the intellectual growth of both teacher and student with the justifiable demands for fiscal responsibility.

Imaginative and innovative approaches are needed to tackle these and similar problems. It is time to move from reacting to situations to anticipating them. Systematic study of the Big University should enable us to identify its characteristics and to understand their implications for the educational process. The success of this approach will ultimately determine whether the Big University will retain the humanistic character of its predecessor or will become an impersonal bureaucratic machine turning out graduates.—SUSAN ARTANDI, *Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey 08903*