Modes of Higher Education

Private Sectors in Higher Education. Structure, Function, and Change in Eight Countries. ROGER L. GEIGER. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1986. xvi, 296 pp., illus. $25.95; paper, $15.95.

American higher education, it is commonly supposed, differs from the systems of other nations in having a significant private sector. What accounts for this apparent anomaly? Is it, indeed, the case that American practice differs sharply from that of other nations? What is the functional significance of "private" and "public" status in higher education? Now that higher education has been viewed as an entitlement in the welfare states of the Western world, and as such a legitimate matter of public concern, is the concept of a private sector bound to become an anachronism? Roger L. Geiger's superb study provides answers to these, and many other, questions in the context of a comparative analysis of eight nations. Geiger, a research associate at Yale University's Institute for Social and Policy Studies, moves with authority and precision through the complex legal and administrative arrangements of the higher education systems of Japan, the Philippines, Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, drawing instructive contrasts with the United States as he proceeds. Since the United States has the largest private sector—matching in size all the rest combined—and the most complex, he uses the experience of the rest to help explain and analyze the various components of the U.S. system. The book—lucidly written and informed by a rich and admirable scholarship—will be read with profit by all serious students of comparative higher education.

Geiger divides the systems under review into three general types—those with "mass" private sectors, those with "parallel" public-private institutions functioning alongside each other, and those with "peripheral" private sectors in a dominant public higher education system. The mass private sector reflects the case of private colleges and universities responding to a demand that cannot be met within the existing public systems (where the public institutions have been the elite, have limited their enrollments, or for other reasons cannot expand to meet rising enrollment pressures). Notable among this category are Japan, with 78% of the nation's students enrolled in private universities, the Philippines, with private institutions comprising some 85% of total enrollment, and Brazil, where two-thirds of the students attend private universities. The Japanese case is of particular interest to Americans. Japan has a large and vibrant higher education sector, with nearly as high a percentage of the relevant age cohort attending college as in the United States, and the system is reinforced by cultural norms emphasizing upward mobility and self-betterment through education. The difference is that the great expansion of post-secondary education in the 1960's took place in the private sector, while such elite public institutions as the University of Tokyo were unable or unwilling to accommodate the surge in enrollments. As in the United States, private education contributes to the diversity and dynamism of the whole system. The "down" side of this massive expansion was that quality was so bad in the poorer institutions that the government stepped in to enforce uniform standards. Also, astoundingly high tuitions exist at some private medical schools, limiting access.

"Parallel" systems are illustrated by the cases of Belgium and the Netherlands. Here deep-rooted cultural and religious cleavages in society require that conflicting interests be represented in different systems, which receive comparable support from the state. The autonomy that once went with private higher education in Belgium, however, has all but disappeared as the loss of effective financial control triggered paternalistic state intervention. In the Netherlands the situation has been somewhat different—public control came in the wake of the international student rebellions of the late 1960's—but the result has been the same. Dutch universities, public and private alike, have been "democratized"; the impact of the government's prescribing the internal governance of the universities seems to have been more profound and lasting on the private universities.

"Peripheral" systems, in which the private sector plays only an occasional role or a role at the margins, are illustrated by France, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. In France, the creation of the Ecole Libre des Sciences Politiques after the Franco-Prussian War and its singular role in providing elite civil servants until the time of Vichy, when it became discredited in circumstances of defeat and national humiliation similar to those that gave it birth in the first place, illustrate the important functions the private institution can perform. Only two of the leading Grandes Ecoles are private, but they play an important role in the economy, and the leading business schools are predominantly private—a clear instance of private sector response to "market failure" in the public higher education sector. The Stockholm School of Economics is a similar case of excellence in a specialized field, a characteristic of the peripheral system, which usually pursues a "niche" or "market segmentation" strategy. The University of Buckingham, founded in 1970, is discussed as the British example of a peripheral private institution. I wished, in this latter case, that the author had chosen to struggle with the charters, traditions, and sources of private wealth of some Oxbridge colleges as arguably more interesting elements of "privateness" within a public system.

In each of the countries studied, the private sector has come to depend upon public funds in greater or lesser degree. Private higher education is not something totally removed from either public scrutiny or public support. Private institutions in higher education represent a kind of compact with society whereby public support is provided under conditions allowing for a substantial measure of autonomy, flexibility, and creativity on the part of the recipients of those funds. The terms of the bargain require that an educational function be performed that cannot be done as easily, as well, or on the requisite scale in the public sector. There is no entitlement to public support (except where the society is fractured by religious or cultural differences and the private sector embodies one set of interests). Rather, there is only the contingent expectation that benefits will be conferred in exchange for a service that is in some sense useful to the wider public. Private higher education is not an end in itself, or an inherently superior way of organizing the tasks of higher education; it is a means for achieving certain practical goals useful to society.

The relevance of foreign experience to the task of understanding our own complex system of higher education lies partly in the fact that American practice exemplifies mass, parallel, and peripheral tendencies. The graduate service institutions, like New York University or Temple (before it was absorbed into the public sphere), provide *more*

educational services, filling a demand just as the Japanese private universities provided the vehicle for significant growth. The unique liberal arts colleges fulfill a *different* educational function that is unavailable elsewhere in the system, although the large public universities and the private research universities attempt to emulate this practice with smaller units within their own frameworks. The private research universities do things *better*, that is, they help set the tone and direction for the entire educational enterprise and the basic research effort for the nation. The mixture of federal, state, and private initiative and financing and the delicate understandings and tacit bargains that sustain the system create the dynamism, diversity, and creative energy that have made American higher education so remarkable.

Privateness still has some role to play even though the state universities and the private universities have grown more alike. Most state universities seek an endowment, cultivate private giving, and rely inexorably on tuition; and the private universities look to the federal and state governments and strive to serve the practical needs of society. But it was the private universities that took the lead in resisting Congressional efforts to require medical schools, as a condition of receiving capitation funds, to accept certain numbers of Americans who had received pre-clinical training in foreign medical schools. Private universities also acted quickly to resist restraints on scientific communication. Evidently there are practical benefits to be found in a system of private higher education as seen in such goals as diversity, independence, flexibility. Where there are abuses in the private sector, society has not hesitated to correct them. Privateness is a virtue that is subject to a calculus of social tradeoffs, and the whole system must operate within a framework of accountability to society at large.

The study brings to bear economic, legal, and political science as well as historical scholarship, combined with a sense of the larger public policy issues and value conflicts surrounding higher education. It provides an empirical foundation to some of the claims made on behalf of private higher education, rebuts or modifies others, and always clarifies the questions that are worth asking about an important subject. This kind of systematic, comparative inquiry contributes to our cumulative understanding and will benefit academic specialists, administrators, policy-makers, and the attentive public.

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