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EDITORIAL

Evolution of Higher Education

Universities and colleges in the United States are encountering a turbulent climate. The quality of their future in many ways depends on how well they respond to evolving realities in the larger world beyond their walls. Ultimately the most significant change affecting universities may be the continuing revolution in information technology. Improved information technology has made possible new methods of education. A high-level* Kellogg Commission letter to the presidents and chancellors of state universities and land-grant colleges† included this comment: "... the number of profit and nonprofit competitors to the traditional higher education has exploded. Our institutions now contend with an enormous variety of educational vendors offering postsecondary coursework, training, degrees, diplomas, and courses of one kind or another. ..." The letter cited as an example the University of Phoenix, "a publicly traded, accredited, for-profit institution of higher education" that "provides distance-learning opportunities to more than 20,000 students annually."

The importance of information technology has been repeatedly emphasized by Donald Langenberg, chancellor of the University of Maryland system. The University of Maryland uses information technology internally and externally. A master of science degree in computer systems management is available on the Internet. Students from Minnesota, Australia, Texas, and Saudi Arabia are participating. A particularly attractive market for such innovative educational options is the large and growing portion of the population aged 25 and older who want or need to update their skills or expand their knowledge.

Public universities have experienced financial problems as many state legislatures lowered their appropriations. Universities in general have increased tuitions faster than inflation. Partly as a result, parents are questioning the quality of the instruction provided. Opinion is widespread that the teaching of undergraduates has a low priority.

The criticism and budget cuts directed at universities have created unease and a corresponding search for solutions. A number of commissions have been formed to do studies and make recommendations. They tend to agree that the status quo cannot be maintained.

Change will not come easily. Customary practices regarding tenure decisions that have existed for decades have become entitlements. The rigid departmental structure has become outmoded. Many of the best opportunities for significant scholarship lie in multidisciplinary areas. Yet a comment in the Kellogg Commission letter is to the effect that society has problems; universities have departments.

The prestige of the presidency of universities has diminished and, as a result, so has the ability of presidents to bring about needed change. The average length of time a president spends in office has declined. Currently, the principal criterion on which presidents are judged is their ability to garner big contributions from individuals, foundations, or the legislature. Thus, faculty members must initiate and cooperate actively in responding to the changed realities. A core recommendation of the Kellogg Commission is the creation of enhanced learning communities whose top priority is facilitating learning by students. Undergraduates would receive special attention. Professors would also be learners. The barriers between departments would be lowered. The criteria employed in decisions concerning tenure would place enhanced weight on the quality of teaching and on innovative scholarship in improving that quality.

In seeking to attain a secure role for themselves in the future, universities have some advantages. They have generous alumni who remember their alma mater. And they provide parents of rebellious 18-year-olds a respectable way of getting their children out of the nest. Electronic communication may be the way of the future, but human dialogue conducted with friendly enthusiasm is to be treasured.

If truly interacting learning communities were established, universities would be uniquely valuable. They would be alert custodians of the world's increasing heritage of knowledge. Their graduates would be better equipped for service to society and better motivated to engage in lifelong learning. Universities would merit the increased respect, approval, and financial support they so sorely need.

Philip H. Abelson

*The Kellogg Commission consists of 25 current or former presidents of state or land-grant universities. †National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, Washington, DC.