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The Governance of Higher Education

The public's future welfare and the national interest are dependent upon our colleges and universities. Consequently, we may expect that the structure of higher education, its purposes, its directions, even its governance, will soon be more widely debated as political issues. We may anticipate more public concern and governmental involvement in these matters than we have at present, and much more than we have had in the past.

The educational system of a country is, as a rule, consistent with the governmental system of that country. Our federal system, with its checks and balances and its assignment of responsibility to the states and local authorities, has permitted, even required, higher education largely to devise its own methods of governance on a local—or, at most, regional—basis. To date, higher education has not been required to consider its total governance from a national point of view. Now that national and international forces are requiring it to do so, the question society must resolve is whether higher education is organized to do this, and whether by itself it is capable of doing it.

As our large universities have grown in size and affluence, many of them have lost understanding of, and sympathy for, the impoverished institutions. As the liberal arts colleges continue to proclaim their singleness of purpose, self-satisfaction prevents them from fully recognizing the value of a more vocational or technical education for many students. As the junior colleges gain identity and importance, they find themselves suffering from a split personality—they are tied to state departments of education, yet long to be accepted as a part of higher education. As pressures for higher education grow and as the difficulties of admission increase, profit-making educational establishments expand, unfettered by surveillance from the recognized colleges and universities.

What is the locus of leadership for the future governance of higher education? Such leadership can no longer be allowed to rest only with associations of colleges and universities which are almost exclusively concerned with the operation of institutions of their own type, and with organizations of individuals who concentrate on advancing their own professional or scholarly fields of study. Setting sentiment aside, we must be prepared to recognize that civil government will play a more influential part. Increased planning and organization have become necessary concomitants of our increasingly strong federal government, and it will soon be widely recognized that they are necessary in the governance of higher education. It is unreasonable to expect that the autonomy which universities and colleges have traditionally possessed in their functions of teaching and research can be extended to their now numerous public services. As educational institutions receive government funds in ever larger amounts, more planning and organization will be needed to protect the public welfare.

If society is to thrive and progress, higher education must nourish individual freedom and creativity, but it must be prepared to do so under forms of governance different from those which have prevailed in the past. A new day, with intensified public and governmental concern for higher education, is rushing upon us. If higher education does not or cannot assume constructive leadership in facing this new day, the public, through its civil government, will be forced to do so.

—WILLIAM K. SELDEN

[Adapted from the 1965 annual report of the executive director of the National Commission on Accrediting.]