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Enclaves of Pluralism: The Private Universities

The survival of predominantly private universities may not be critical to the survival of civilization, yet their importance to higher education for the last 1000 years—their position and their purpose—makes their future worthy of deliberate decision rather than happenstance.

Any such consideration must recognize that completely private universities no longer exist. The convergence of public and private institutions started years ago and accelerated significantly in the last decade. For example, almost all universities now use public funds, private philanthropy, endowment income, and revenue from services they render to pay their expenses. Further, most provide a wide variety of undergraduate and graduate programs and strain to the utmost to add "new" ones. They select faculty in about the same manner, they have similar systems of governance, and they are subject to the same legal constraints (for example, unemployment compensation). Thus, each institution is, at best, more or less private or more or less public.

But significant differences do remain.

The predominantly private institutions have the potential for greater flexibility. They can exercise greater or lesser selectivity in assembling their study body. They can choose fewer programmatic variations or can limit themselves to scholarship. They can exert considerable leadership for change if they wish to do so.

By doing some or all of these things, private universities provide a pluralism matching that of the society they serve. So far, they have been doing this at little cost to society, although that cost has risen in recent years. Indeed, it is the problem of rising costs that has created the need to examine the future of private universities. If there were no need for subsidy, there would be no problem—private universities could continue to maintain a respectable profile among institutions of higher education.

An argument has been made that private universities, with their available open places, could take care of the overflow of students in the growing (1960's) pressure for higher education for all. A more pertinent point is that every student at a public university is offered a scholarship, regardless of need. This scholarship equals the difference between cost per student and actual charges. In principle, this difference could be made available to each student to use as tuition wherever desired; some 18 states have already adopted this practice.

Finally, we must not overlook the strong historic roots that tie private universities to the very beginning of higher education in America. Private universities are no longer the sole avenues of higher education, constituting just under half of the number of institutions in the country and enrolling only 30 percent of the students. Yet they continue to provide important contacts between faculty and students. Their small size and selectivity in faculty and student body have given private universities an elitist connotation. Size is not to be confused with quality—it goes without saying that many scholarly attainments stem from large institutions. Nor should elitism be equated with social superiority, greater wisdom, or a higher degree of humanity. The small, elite, quality university simply provides a community of scholarship for some people of high intellectual capacity.

Thus the diversity offered by the private institution, mirroring the makeup of society, should make the case for its survival. It is difficult to foresee society abandoning such an important reflection of its own image.—NORMAN HACKERMAN, *President, Rice University, Houston, Texas 77001*