

Expanding to Meet Needs in Higher Education

“The question is not whether to expand our facilities for education beyond the high school but *how* to expand them.” The community college offers great promise in this direction.

MANY ARGUMENTS in favor of expanding higher education in the United States have been made. Of these, three seem relevant for this discussion: the increase in the national birth rate, the ever greater need for highly skilled personnel in the American economy, and the need for a better educated citizenry if the American democracy is to take its proper place in the world today. To these three arguments may be added a statement of fact which must be considered: higher education is increasingly becoming fashionable. Whether this is wise or desirable is, at the moment, aside from the point. All signs point in the direction of an even greater demand for education beyond the high school in the coming decade than was the case in the decade just past.

These three arguments, together with the statement of fact, seem to me persuasive. The question is not whether to expand our facilities for education beyond the high school but *how* to expand them.

In view of all the public and professional discussion of this topic, there is surely little need to develop these points in greater detail. They are mentioned here only because of a tendency in the thinking of some concerned with higher education to accept the conclusion—but

to regret the reasons. As a result, the last few years have shown a disposition on the part of some colleges and universities, and of some leaders in higher education, to wish the problem away—or at least to let someone else solve it.

The policy of “Let John do it” might be satisfactory in a nation with centralized management of policy and practice in education. Under these circumstances, an official of Government would be held responsible by the people. If adequate provision were not made for the coming generations, the Government in authority would be brought sharply to task. Clearly, this is not the situation in the United States. Decentralization of management applies both to schools and to colleges, and both to public and to private institutions. The solution of nation-wide problems therefore becomes a collaborative task and one in which every institution and individual must play his part. To say, “Let John do it,” is, in effect, to say in the long run, “Let Washington do it alone.”

Since the United States is a continent, rather than a nation in the European sense, we may presume a wide variation of practice from one part of the country to another, and between differing socio-economic situations. There can be little

doubt that the expansion in higher education will take place across the board: i.e., most present types of institutions providing instruction beyond the high school will expand in one way or another. Yet, if sensible cooperation and planning are to take place, there must be agreement on some basic principles. Two of these would seem to me to govern. Expansion must be managed in a way that brings us ever nearer the national goal of equal opportunity for youth, without regard to race, or religion, or economic circumstance. Second, expansion must be so managed as to make the most economical use of funds and personnel; and in the next twenty years, the most serious problem will be personnel.

The Community College Offers Promise

When these two governing principles are applied to the three considerations listed at the start of this article, there seems to be one logical conclusion: the major part of expansion should take place in the junior or community colleges. Every study indicates that the chances of obtaining higher education for children of middle and lower economic groups increase greatly when an institution is to be found near home. A network of community colleges across the nation would therefore bring us far closer to our goal of equal opportunity. In addition, recent studies of the available facilities for training faculty for the four-year colleges and universities make it clear that there will be a serious shortage for the next two or three decades. The chances of expanding these four-year colleges and universities to meet the demand, while at the same time maintaining quality of teaching and research, therefore, are low.

This does not mean, however, that there are not a large number of highly educated men and women in communities all over the country who would be capable of giving the type of instruction needed in the first two years of post-high school study. On the contrary, the United States is relatively wealthy from this point of view. Included in these groups would be those who have retired from academic work, some of the staff of the public and private school systems, and a wide range of specialized personnel connected with industry and commerce. This last group may be of particular importance. There has been an immense growth of training programs within industry in recent years, and it seems reasonable to expect that this type of training will increase as the years go by. To meet the need for a higher percentage of skilled personnel, therefore, collaborative efforts between community colleges and commerce and industry are obviously sensible. This can presumably best be accomplished at the community level where collaboration can take place with a minimum of waste motion in planning and the use of personnel.

Finally, the American people have long been accustomed to solving their educational problems at the community level. Here the whole system of financing for public schools has been established. Community plans for educational growth still form the basis of state programs of financial aid. Since it seems likely that expansion in education beyond the high school will have to take place largely with tax support, it is reasonable to argue that existing machinery should be used.

It should be made clear that this argument for expansion primarily at the community college level does

not imply that there should be no expansion in four-year colleges or graduate and professional instruction. Quite the opposite. If the predictions of the economists are correct, the nation will need a higher percentage at all levels of skilled occupations, including those involving research and complex management. To urge the expansion of community colleges is an argument in favor of maintaining and improving the quality of the present four-year colleges and universities, and not an argument which would lead either to weakening them or to reducing their influence. What is needed is an over-all view of the national need and the present educational structure. Seen in this context, our weakness is at the point of providing equal opportunity for the able student, and at the point of providing adequate facilities for training a higher percentage of skilled personnel.

Nor should an argument for expansion at the level of the community college be taken as an argument in opposition to liberal education. Quite apart from its inherent value, a strong case can be made that a good general or liberal education is essential for the citizen of the coming decades. Community college programs, whether designed for those to continue to the four-year college, or whether designed in collaboration with industry for specialized skills, should include substantial allocations of time to the humanities and to the social sciences. Among the most hopeful developments since the second war have been the programs evolved in the leading institutes of technology in these areas. Because of the high level of scientific specialization in such institutions, it has often not been easy to work out an effective collaboration between the humanities and the sciences. Commu-

nity colleges with smaller faculties and student bodies should be able, presumably, to work out such programs with greater ease.

James B. Conant, in urging the expansion of community colleges, pointed to the necessity of making them "fashionable." Clearly, this is an important point. If high-school graduates regard them as merely a poor substitute for the fashionable four-year college, then their programs will never be successful. For this reason a close interrelation with the colleges is essential. The successful record of such relationship in several states shows that this can be done. Fully as important as the need for becoming "fashionable" is the need for making these institutions, in the best sense, "practical." In days of a rapidly changing economy, this implies close collaboration with those parts of society which are taking the lead in technological advance. In the American economy this means business and industry. It would be ridiculous to prepare young people for highly skilled occupations which are no longer needed because of scientific advance. The programs of the community colleges should therefore be established with the cooperation of science and industry, and it is probable that some of the actual instruction should be given as "on the job" training. Such collaborative patterns have, of course, been established in many parts of the country with outstanding success. What is suggested here is therefore not anything new, but rather the development of activities in which the American people have a long body of effective experience.

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As one looks across the scene of educational facilities for youth in the United States, and as one considers the difficulties ahead in sensible expansion, perhaps the key problem is that of cooperation. Lacking any central and powerful agency for planning and coordination, the several parts of American education have tended in recent decades to separate from each other rather than to join forces. Prior to 1900, the secondary schools and the colleges were in close working relationship. With the expansion of high schools, however, a smaller percentage of graduates were capable of or interested in further education and the curriculum of the secondary school therefore became subject to many other influences. Personal and official connections between teachers and administrators of the schools and the colleges became fewer and fewer as the decades of the twentieth century went by. It is perhaps fair now to say that the colleges have influence only in the college preparatory aspect of the high-school curriculum—and that even here the influence is far weaker than it was fifty years ago. The detached observer of the American scene might therefore comment

that we are in a poor position to attempt a collaborative effort. He might go further and point out that we lack information on the interrelationship between our educational system and the growth and working of the American economy. On these grounds he might express doubts whether we are in a position to attempt a sensible expansion of higher education.

Such arguments do not seem to me compelling. There are healthy signs of a rapprochement between the several parts of the school and college world. The lively activities initiated by the scholarly and learned societies of the past few years are a clear indication of a reviving interest in the whole of American education by leaders in the collegiate world. The appointment of a Presidential Committee on education beyond the high-school is still another indication. If we are to maintain our policy of decentralization of management and of centers of initiative, we *must* develop formal and informal methods of breaking down existing barriers of understanding and cooperation. The community college would seem to me an admirable first step in this direction.

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