



A Task for

SINCE medieval times, universities have been places concerned with particular kinds of knowledge, skills, and values. The teaching of students has been central to the enterprise, and usually universities have been concerned with the creation and spread of knowledge. Historically, every university activity that creates a product—be it a play production, a cornfield harvest, or a busy hospital ward—has been ancillary to some work of thought, skill development, or value exploration.

For most other institutions, the opposite is true. Some product or purpose is seen as the end of their activity, no matter how much creative thought, skill development, or value inculcation is demanded for its realization. In this sense, the distinctive characteristic of the university is generally understood.

While academic dogma holds that the pursuit of knowledge is justifiable as an end, everywhere there is a tacit understanding that not all knowledge is equal. No university ever did, or could, work with all knowledge and every skill. The choices made define the character of a university and reveal the interrelationships between the university and its constituency. University function is less an absolute, theoretical entity than a subtle set of working agreements made to ensure that certain kinds of knowledge, skills, and values are deliberately cultivated rather than left to the indeliberate workings of other institutions. Medieval universities worked in

areas that reflected ecclesiastical concerns.

Since the 19th century, American state universities have emphasized skills and types of knowledge sought by citizens and thought to enhance the values of a democratic political state. Their faith in scientific progress prompted certain men to create research universities such as Johns Hopkins and the University of Chicago, where they hoped the scientific exploration of nature would yield riches comparable to those found by the explorations of Cortez and Pizarro. Necessarily judgments about the functioning of universities are value judgments about those who sponsor them and about the society in which they exist.

Traditionally, Americans have relied on their country's wealth and diffuseness to avoid judgments that call for harsh social decisions. Rather than fight to dislodge entrenched interests in one locale, Americans have frequently chosen to move elsewhere. Rather than attempt thorough reform of an institution, they have often chosen to create a new one. In American higher education, this practice began when men dissatisfied with the state of affairs at Harvard chose to establish Yale, and it has not abated. As a result, the country acquired large numbers of colleges and universities established to serve the interests of different groups. By the mid-20th century, American higher education incorporated several strata of colleges and universities, each having a substantially

the University

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different clientele and a distinct view of what knowledge, values, and skills were appropriate for its activity. Few Americans consciously challenge this diversity on grounds of principle, for to do so would invite the kind of divisive social criticism we have tended to avoid.

While diversity persists in higher education, there are strong currents in American society working against it. The powerful belief that we are one nation and one people condemns diversity that is rooted in inequality. Second, the finiteness of our economic resources makes it less and less likely that new groups can count on future growth to furnish them with the means of achieving their goals. We have reached the point where the accommodation of new groups and new functions requires the redistribution of wealth and power. Last, there is an urgency about man's precarious relationship to his environment on the planet that presses all men and social institutions to adopt, as a common purpose, the survival of mankind. The implications for higher education of these developments are already apparent and will be felt increasingly during the years ahead.

An Ever-Flowing Fount?

The generation that followed World War II saw the apex of the belief that schooling is an ever-flowing fount of material suc-

cess and social advancement. From this belief followed logically the idea that the benefits of education should be immediately accessible to all citizens at public expense. At enormous cost, the nation has attempted to realize this goal. Community colleges are found everywhere. State teachers colleges have become regional universities. State universities have become multiversities. Commissions of higher education exist to orchestrate the educational endeavor, and in a few instances, as in Wisconsin, state institutions have been incorporated into a single mammoth university. Minor colleges, which were once content to offer simple vocational training and rudimentary instruction in humane subjects to the youth of their locale, have cast themselves in the image of major universities which have gained eminence through their research activity and the illustriousness of their graduates.

The outcome has not fulfilled the hopes of the public. There are disillusioned parents who attribute the alienation of their offspring to the effects of university life. In the main, however, the disappointment springs from the painful realization that the university is a minor rather than a major avenue of social and economic mobility. The eminence of the graduates of prestigious schools seems to

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be a function of the eminence they bring to college rather than a function of the instruction they receive. And college graduates are learning to their dismay that good job opportunities do not expand automatically to absorb an increasing supply of degree holders. To the contrary, the larger the educated labor force, the larger the percentage of educated workers who must settle for relatively low level positions.

There will be neither economic nor social returns to new college students commensurate with the investment in the expansion of public education. Where the public has grasped this awful fact, the reaction has been to challenge the need to pour more money into universities. Critics question the validity of the attempt to make provincial colleges coarse imitations of national research universities, and they challenge the value of large expenditures for theoretical research and instruction in esoteric fields of knowledge. Even the most prestigious universities have not escaped criticism, and the questioning has scarcely begun. The movement that began as a drive to make equal higher education universally available may end as an assault on the elitist character of the more privileged universities.

The demand for universality in higher education has created an irreconcilable competition for available resources. Increasing costs—whether in private or public institutions—are forcing a review of the need for the various functions that have become associated with higher education. Taxpayers, public conservatives, aging liberals, disaffected students, social radicals, prospective employers, and embattled professors all have pronounced views. Taxpayers and parents have long expected universities to accept much responsibility for the socialization of youth. Most universities have attempted to diminish their activities in this area, but inescapably they must accept some degree of responsibility.

A major function of higher education has been to provide students with credentials in vocational and professional areas. Radical critics argue tellingly that the long schooling required of those who seek credentials is a

screen operated for the benefit of vested social elites. There is strong evidence that the credential itself, rather than some learned skill, is sometimes the principal benefit of schooling. In a number of areas, as much as 80 percent of the technical skills required are learned on the job.

Academicians feel a responsibility to provide cultural leadership for the nation, but only a handful of institutions can legitimately claim such a role. More often than not, cultural leaders are found outside university circles. There is less reason to question the university's role as a disseminator of cultural values, although it shares this work with many others, including the communications media.

During the past generation, universities have engaged in an enormous amount of consultation and contract research that many doubt can be continued at present levels without destroying the university's historic teaching function. Obviously, the criticisms are chaotic, but they reflect the chaotic state of American society and will not diminish unless there is a resolution of the contradictions that exist within American society. In turn, that can happen only when American society achieves some accommodation with the other societies of the earth.

Beyond "Growth Rates"

A brief article is no place to attempt a sustained critique of the situation of American society, and it is certainly not the place to propose solutions to complex social problems. Nevertheless, the contours of the American predicament are becoming clear and can be stated simply. The American economic system is geared to continuing economic growth. The "health" of the system is defined in terms of growth rates. The system has enabled us to achieve a higher level of per capita consumption than mankind has ever before known, but it has created problems that at present appear insoluble. Since the earth's resources are limited, sooner or later our economy must stop growing, and we must find a new yardstick for measuring "health" and "success."

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Our approach to the upward limit of national per capita wealth is being hastened by our population increase. It is hastened also by the strain our technology and technocratic organization impose on the ecology. Viewed solely from a national perspective, we appear to be near the maximum production of wealth that can be sustained for more than a few generations, and possibly we have already passed the point. Yet a national perspective is obviously unrealistic. The ecology is global, the economy is becoming so. The planet cannot provide earth's present population with a level of consumption anywhere near that attained in the United States. A global expansion of industrial technology to bring mankind up to the American rate of consumption would wreck the ecology. World population increases currently anticipated will render that which is already impossible simply inconceivable.

As men come to understand these doleful truths, more and more they tend to condemn the United States as the "robber baron" of nations. Its consumption habits and its enormously successful economic and technological practices are characterized as somehow cancerous, leading mankind to some ultimate doom. To forestall this bleak vision of the future will require drastic change in the United States, involving changes in values, economic system, and distribution of wealth. There may be enormous disagreements about the timing, causation, or probable outcome of this scenario, but the contour of the predicament is inescapable. It lurks behind all ideational, behavioral, and structural approaches to American social problems and will not be dispelled.

Whatever else they do, universities concern themselves with knowledge and the human implications of knowledge. The functions of socialization, credentialization, research, cultural dissemination, etc., are

fulfilled through the medium of working with knowledge and values. The present situation of man makes it imperative that universities adopt, as a criterion by which they decide what knowledge to emphasize, its importance to man's survival on his planet as a humane being. Academic men can help to reduce gargantuan questions to manageable topics that can be investigated rationally. Universities can nurture diversity and champion dissent. We do not know enough to be sure which views are legitimate, which useless.

Bureaucratic entrenchments and clean-cut organizational patterns should be resisted, as they stultify imagination. The current chaos about university functions has the merit of keeping open odd crevices and the possibility of creative contacts between unlikely partners. In universities, people from different backgrounds—be they social, intellectual, racial, or geographic—should have encounters through which they can extend and heighten their consciousness of the human situation.

These fragmentary proposals do not claim for universities any "unique" role. They are not reform programs, as such, that claim the potential of achieving any specific solutions. They do rise out of the belief that promising solutions and reforms will be the product of powerful intellectual activity and that their chance of success will depend on their receiving wide dissemination. There is space within higher education for both activities. No institution sustained by established authority will long succor ideas that promote revolutionary activity. But there is no need to speculate that proposals for change must lead to violent revolution. We do not know. Ours is a time that requires thought and action. Universities will serve mankind well if they can help conjoin reason, tactics, and value commitment in the effort to preserve a planet suitable for human and humane life. Lesser tasks must wait. □

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