

The Tension Between Quality and Equality in
United States Higher Education*

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There is a natural tension between an ethos of egalitarianism and excellence in higher education. I would not venture to say it cannot be overcome ultimately; but in the short run the great love for equality which De Tocqueville noted as a characteristic of the American nation can only mean a decline in the academic quality of colleges and universities. I think the same could be said of elementary and secondary education but I am not as familiar with these levels and will restrict myself in general to higher education. I am rendering no verdict on the desirability of the forces which are adversely affecting excellence in education. My assignment was to assess the impact of equality on excellence in education, not judge it.

In education the American egalitarian thrust began as early as Thomas Jefferson who said that a minimal level of education for all would be essential to preserve the new democratic Republic. He is sometimes misread. Actually, the Republic as founded by the Founding Fathers was based on a belief in the inequality of man and the Constitution appears to reflect in many respects this assumption. The Founding Fathers almost without exception believed in the natural inequality of man and opted for a system of education that would be aimed at persons of talent and virtue so as to provide proper leadership for the nation. I think modern education has forgotten the crucial need of a nation for leaders possessing intellectual, moral, and civic excellence (read, "virtue"). The more pessimistic might well claim our schools are no longer designed to produce the type of leadership that Washington, Franklin, and Jefferson thought essential to keep the new nation healthy. The culprit is largely, but not entirely, our passion for equality.

This passion strikes hard at any concept of elitism based on inequality of intellectual ability and concept. It also strikes at moral virtue based on intellectual constructs partially because of the difficulty in building or understanding such systems, systems that demand rigorous intellectual application. Conviction that there exists a hierarchy of pleasures; that some types of living are superior to others; that some types of human action are per se desirable over others; that some values deserve precedence over others; and that intellectual pleasures are superior to material or physical ones, crumble under a false sense of equality that gives equal weight to all opinions and that subjects moral, cultural, and intellectual values to popular scrutiny. One cannot help but recall John Stuart Mill's warning about the vulnerability of the independent mind (certainly a major purpose of education) to "the despotism of custom" and the "ascendency of public opinion". There is a proper role for equality in society; but it does not lie in educational outcomes.

*Conference on "Excellence and Equality in American Culture"
Bolton Lodge, Vermont, November 12, 1977

How has egalitarianism weakened education in our time?

Firstly, there is the problem of sheer numbers to be educated. This expansion has occurred largely in the state universities, the largest of which now contain over forty per cent of all students in college. Public institutions of higher education were virtually non-existent until the Civil War. But as a result of this escalating size:

- a) college presidents have ceased to be intellectual leaders and have become, instead, administrators, fund raisers, labor negotiators and politicians. When is the last time you heard the president of a large university give a major address on the purposes of education?
- b) we are seeing the creation of multi-campus universities which increasingly seek common standards throughout the system. This eliminates diversity of missions, sets minimal ~~common~~ ^{common} standards, and homogenizes the product.
- c) state systems are bureaucratized and the real command ends up in an administrative bureau at the State Capitol where the politicians increasingly look upon it as another state agency that should be subject to legislative direction. It then becomes politically expedient to respond to voting constituents by providing equal treatment and even equal results in the education system.

Alexander Astin, UCLA, in a highly provocative article on the "Failure of Educational Policy" in the United States, in the September issue of Change magazine, is highly critical of the impact of size in educational institutions.

Secondly, higher education has increasingly become a social instrument to accomplish social objectives springing out of equality precepts. Laudable public policy seeks to root out sexism, racism, and unequal opportunity for the handicapped; but in so doing it begins to challenge traditional university autonomy by opening university files, interfering with the selection of students and faculty, and lodging final decisions on student termination in the hands of administrative tribunals and the courts. Educators are losing control of their institution to the State acting in the name of society. As Detocqueville said: "Americans seem to love equality more than freedom."

Thirdly, the preoccupation with equality has resulted in a growing breakdown of traditional quality control in education as we seek to draw more and more people into our educational systems. Experience credits; TV credits; off-campus and self-study coursework; "no grade" courses, an elective curriculum; and many other gadgets designed to draw people into education under conditions where monitoring for equality is difficult or impossible must reduce traditional performance standards. This is particularly true when we cease making distinction between the quality and educational relevance of the variegated credits and degrees. One degree becomes as intellectually respectable as another. The ultimate innovation will be a Ph.D. awarded without attending college!

Forthly, egalitarianism has reduced much of higher education to a non-intellectual process by substituting job skills for humanistic ones thus

undermining the historic purpose of education. While a case can be made for undergraduate and high school vocational training, it can also be maintained that job training can be done by business corporations, the military service and graduate schools without some of the trade-offs that such job training implies in the formal educational institutions.

Finally, despite all the explanations, some of them labored, for the fall-off in SAT scores and for the weak reading, writing, and math skills of entering college freshmen, one suspects that the real cause is teacher despair at providing a sound intellectual diet for mass consumption. I have no doubt that solid and disciplined intellectual habituation is no longer prevalent on American campuses as it was a century ago.

What do we do about it? While there are a number of concrete steps that can be taken to preserve excellence amidst a growing egalitarianism, one that seems most obvious is to preserve diversity in higher education. This diversity between public and private and within the public and private systems will provide different levels of academic challenge and a variety of emphases that will best meet the needs of a variegated student body possessing different appetites for learning and different capacities to learn. This diversity has been an important bulwark for a free and pluralistic society. There are many reasons for maintaining it. One of the most important is to preserve some semblance of intellectual and cultural excellence amidst growing pressures for equality.