

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

IJS-2: PROMISES AND PROBLEMS;
AN AMERICAN FORTNIGHT IN EDUCATION
(continued, Part II)

Program in Public Policy Studies
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Dear Mr. Nolte:

II. HIGHER EDUCATION

All of the problems of primary and secondary schools identified in my first newsletter have their counterparts in higher education. Yet, if there is any one particular problem facing higher education which deserves special attention, it is the problem of homogeneity: every college, whether it be a two-year community college in California or a Midwestern multiversity, aspires to be a Harvard. This is not just to say that each of these institutions aspires to be an excellent educational institution but instead to be an excellent educational institution in the exact image of Harvard. This observation is not new and novel. Indeed, recently in a report to the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, a committee under the Chairmanship of Mr. Frank Newman, Associate Director of University Relations at Stanford, made this very point.² This is an observation which a casual observer of American higher education might miss. But as one participates in the life of an institution of higher education or as he travels around the country, this observation becomes quite clear. The lack of diversity would not be important in a small, homogeneous country; but in the United States where our differences may now be more important than our similarities, this lack of diversity can be devastating. As the needs of students and the society as a whole become more diverse, the ability of any single institution to respond to the broad cross section of demands becomes ever more difficult. The crucial challenge facing American higher education is to learn how to deal with the range of demands made by society and its students within its limited means. During my travels I visited two institutions which were attempting to meet this particular challenge; and through my association with Pitzer College of the Claremont Colleges, I can report on a third attempt to meet the challenge of diversity.

An institution which is attempting to contribute to diversity in American higher education is the College for Human Services. This institution was founded in lower Manhattan by Mrs. Audrey Cohen on a grant from the U.S. Department of Labor. The College for Human Services started out as a manpower training operation. The College was to take persons who had not completed their high school education and who were out of work and provide them with

2. Report to the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, Frank Newman, Chairman, February, 1971.

the skills necessary to take positions in various social services. Most of the positions for which these persons were to be trained did not exist. Not only was this institution supposed to serve a constituency not then served by American higher education, but also it was to create whole new career leaders in sectors which were crying for new and imaginative approaches to social problems. The College for Human Services has established a two year program to prepare persons to become paralegal and paramedical professionals as well as social welfare professionals.

Although this college started out as a strictly vocational training exercise, it has quickly become an institution which also attempts to provide its students with a sound social science education. The social science component of the program is an interdisciplinary program drawing on all of the social sciences. The curriculum for the College for Human Services is distinguished by its imagination and by its ability to break out of the disciplinary straight jacket.³

The vocational training curriculum of the college is based on an internship procedure; during the first year the students work on a part-time basis in a social service agency; during the second year the students work half-time in an agency and attend school during the other half. It is hoped in the near future to expand the activities of the College into a full four year program; however, even as a four year institution, the College intends to maintain its mixture of work, training, and social science education.

In the process of providing an education for a new constituency and new personnel for new jobs in old agencies, the College for Human Services has transformed the training of dropouts and the unemployed as well as invigorated the delivery of certain social services: both have been accomplished by breaking away from the rigidities of traditional undergraduate instruction. The College is an example of how diversity can contribute to innovation.

Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts is another experimental endeavor attempting to contribute to the diversity of American higher education, albeit in a more traditional manner in a more traditional setting. Hampshire College is the experimental college created through the cooperation of Smith, Amherst, Mt. Holyoke, and the University of Massachusetts. Although focusing on the usual upper middle class constituency for American higher education, Hampshire has attempted to develop a curriculum which confronts some of the difficult problems facing higher education. The curriculum attempts to break out of the disciplinary framework, although it still organizes all knowledge into a set of schools--social sciences, natural sciences, and humanities. Within these schools the disciplines have some identity, but most of the courses cut across disciplines. Actual experience is an important component in the Hampshire curriculum in a way quite similar to, though less vocational than, the College for Human Services. Each student is encouraged to undertake some sort of experiential and/or internship program. Other curricular innovations at Hampshire include a

3. Course Guide, College for Human Services, 1970.

January term, when students pursue a particular interest outside of the course framework, and an undergraduate course sequence in law. This law program, guided by Professor Lester Mazor, Henry Luce Professor of Law, is intended to contribute to the understanding of the law as a social and political institution, not to be preparation for a vocation as a lawyer.

Hampshire's innovations transcend curriculum changes. For example, Hampshire is built upon a new relationship of faculty member to institution. Tenure has not been established at Hampshire. Instead, faculty members are hired on contracts ranging up to, in theory, seven years (however, at present the longest contract seems to be for five years). Although over the long run this lack of tenure may create greater flexibility and perhaps even quality in the performance of faculty members at the school, this arrangement has drawbacks. According to comments of faculty members at Hampshire, there appears to be a great deal of insecurity among the faculty -- most of whom are young -- because of uncertainty of future association with Hampshire and difficulty of finding a position elsewhere. The teaching demands at Hampshire may leave little time for minting the coin of the academic realm -- publications. Although the administration has created the possibility of long term contracts without tenure, it appears that these contracts have not been created in the numbers that one would expect in order to minimize the insecurity that lack of tenure creates.

The problems at Hampshire may result from the fact that it is very much the dream of a few persons who, as administrators, have created this new institution. Commitment to ideas about what the institution should look like in the future on the part of the founding fathers seems to have created some tensions for those who have come later (however, it is interesting to note that Hampshire has not recruited a faculty; instead it has responded to a flood of applications for positions). Although the catalogue of the institution claims that Hampshire intends to be a "process" of ever becoming and never finishing, it appears that this intention has not been manifested in policy. An exciting place is Hampshire at the moment; but its future seems to require that all of those participating in the Hampshire experiment take seriously the commitment to the process of change which the catalogue claims.

Hampshire College was spawned from a cluster of independent colleges, cooperating together in certain limited ways. There are many who claim the concept of cluster colleges offers the greatest hope for diversifying higher education. By creating complexes of relatively small institutions, perhaps one can create the diversity which looks to the needs of different groups of individuals in a humane manner without losing the advantages of large shared resources. My own experience in the cluster colleges of Claremont indicates that there may be something to this belief. However, often within this particular cluster the most innovative and experimental institutions have to fight to maintain their identity in the face of pressure for conformity from the other members of the cluster. Indeed, Pitzer College, the newest and most experimental of the Claremont Colleges, has found itself since its inception in a very peculiar position vis-a-vis its sister institutions: quite radical in rhetoric and financially weak. Most of the innovative and experimental institutions in the United States are relatively new; therefore they are underfunded and have a marginal economic existence. Pitzer is no exception and is therefore vulnerable.

Pitzer as an experimental college is quite different from Hampshire: it is not the result of a dream of a few men who worked to make real their ideas. Instead, it was a response to a donation of money and an attempt to even up the power relationships of long standing Colleges in the Claremont cluster. It is said by many that Pitzer was originally founded to be a conservative girl's school to complement Claremont Men's College, the most conservative of the Claremont Colleges. But through a serendipitous accident of history, Pitzer has become an institution following an experimental ethos. Pitzer is experimental in a very anarchic manner: it is not the result of the grand design but is the combined effect of a number of young, enterprising faculty members, each doing his own thing. It is difficult to evaluate Pitzer as an experimental institution, for no single experiment is institution-wide. The greatest asset which Pitzer has is its flexibility and the supportive environment which it gives innovative faculty. But this asset is often wasted because the institution itself lacks the continuity of an agreed on purpose. What Pitzer has gained in flexibility it has lost in identity.

The best strategy for encouraging innovation in liberal arts undergraduate education is not clear. But I would conclude that presently it lies nearer to Hampshire than to Pitzer.

All of these experimental institutions share in common a problem endemic to American higher education but especially crucial to the new, innovative institution: their financial positions are precarious. Although some individuals, foundations, and government agencies have been generous, their generosity does not match the cost of innovation. Experiments entail risks, and risks are much more expensive than tried-and-true activity whose return is well established. For every risk that succeeds in experimental colleges, there are usually two failures, and someone must underwrite not only the success but also the failure. The challenge for public policy toward higher education is to develop modes of financial support which will encourage an attitude of experimentation among all institutions. Today we have not done this. In future newsletters I shall suggest particular modes of funding which I believe will serve this purpose.

III. NEW TYPES OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Following the suggestions of Ivan Illich that education may require doing away with the schools, persons in and out of "the system" are developing alternatives to the traditional schools.

One such institutional alternative is being developed around instructional television. In a report submitted to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, prepared by the International Center for Educational Development, it was suggested that the Corporation and other agencies found a new institution to develop a comprehensive set of television programs for formal educational purposes. In addition, it has recently been suggested by Alan Pifer, the President of the Carnegie Foundation, and by Ewald Nyquist, the New York Commissioner of Education, that a new external examining authority be established for the certification of accomplishment in higher education pursued via instructional television. This flurry of activity, along with the success of Sesame Street, indicates an awareness that television offers a whole new medium for the delivery of education, which is yet to be tapped effectively.

What is often overlooked even in the most sophisticated proposals for utilizing television for educational instruction is the importance of developing a new social support system. By social support system I mean the development of formal or informal institutional arrangements to assist those who use television as the core of the educational experience. The Open University in England gives us an opportunity to see whether these new technologies and limited attempts at developing social support systems can succeed: in England, the Open University is enrolling students in television courses and at the same time providing limited tutorial assistance at the local level. New sources of tutorial support and opportunities for discussion among television students constitute social support systems for instructional television. Exactly what these tutorial systems ought to be and how they ought to be organized is an open question; and to this question I shall direct a great deal of attention in England in the fall.

Another experiment in an alternative form of education is the communal organization of social life. While in Boston I stayed with members of a commune in Somerville. Many of those living in the commune were involved in one way or another with the educational process. One person was teaching in a free school; another was a teacher in the public school system; others taught at or studied at institutions of higher education in the Boston/Cambridge area. The exciting aspect of this commune was that it gave an opportunity to those interested in education to share their commitment: each reinforced the others' attempts to improve the experience not only of those in the commune but also of those who were taught by or studied with the members of the commune. This commune was not an educational commune in the sense that all of its members were involved in a single educational enterprise as a communal activity. However, the vitality and concern of those living in the commune indicated to me that we should explore once again in contemporary America the possibility of developing small learning and teaching communities; that is communes where all of those participating in the communal life would also contribute to a common educational project. This would create a rewarding experience for commune member and student alike -- indeed students and teachers could share the communal framework.

One further observation is in order based upon my brief encounter with the commune: there are a number of dedicated, intelligent, and excited young people interested in teaching as a life-time endeavor. However, many of these young people are alienated from the formal school system and now participate in activities designed to offer education totally outside the public schools and universities. Yet, at the same time, most students now and in the future will be educated in the formal system. The challenge facing the system is how to convince these young educators that the system offers them an opportunity to conduct more effectively the learning process. To date the system has not responded. How can the system respond is the question with which my trip has left me.

IV. STRATEGIES FOR REFORMING THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

The most striking impression which I have brought back with me is the apparent lack of coherent strategies for encouraging new approaches to the problems of education and for implementing desirable innovations.

Although at this point I shall not offer detailed suggestions for dealing with this problem, I must offer a more detailed statement of the problem. I can do this best by reporting and commenting upon my conversation with Dr. Sidney Marland, U.S. Commissioner of Education.

During my visit to the Office of Education in Washington I was struck by the attitude of high level officials -- they were sincerely looking for suggestions for reform which could be implemented quickly and have impact on large sectors of American education. However, there was very little sense of how to accomplish this goal. In my conversations with Dr. Marland, he suggested that the most important project was to convince those within the system -- that is teachers, administrators, and politicians -- that various substantive reforms were in fact necessary and appropriate. He correctly indicated that the first condition for accomplishing this reform is to recognize that something is wrong; a state of affairs which he said has now finally occurred in public education but which is still not the case in higher education. But when pressed about strategies for persuading those in the system to adopt needed reform, he fell back on traditional suggestions: retraining of teachers, the Teacher Corps, prototype programs such as the University without Walls, and the Experimental Schools Program.

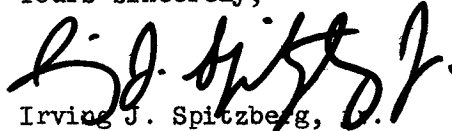
Dr. Marland's emphasis on prototypes is of special interest, because it is a strategy of reform which is the favorite of all governmental agencies and most private foundations. An example of this strategy is the Experimental Schools Program in the Office of Education. This program will allocate fifteen million dollars during the next fiscal year to three or four prototype schools, which are to be the models of what the new school systems ought to be. Yet no thought has been given as to how these prototypes would influence education in general. And it is this step -- the jump from prototype to general application -- which has been overlooked by those who are seeking change in American education.

In order to induce change one must develop not only prototypes but also a wide ranging strategy for the implementation of reform. This strategy must extend to every district and institution of education in the United States. And it must be one that involves not only those in the system but those outside too. A network of change agents must be created and put in responsible positions within the system. It is interesting to note that the Parkway School in Philadelphia was the idea of the public relations officer for the school system, not a professional educator: it was created within the system by a visitor of sorts, but the fact that the idea for the school emerged within the system has contributed significantly to its success. The Parkway School is an example of the power of a change agent within the system. Details for a strategy for reform cannot be offered here; although in future newsletters, I shall attempt to comment at length on possible strategies. The important point which I hope to communicate here is that in spite of a number of encouraging experiments in education at all levels, little work has been done in developing new approaches to implementing the experiments on a large scale. Indeed, such work seems to have been limited to issues in instructional television. It is to this problem that those interested in educational policy must turn their attention.

CONCLUSION

I have now shared with you my impressions of the promises and problems of American education (or parts thereof) on the eve of my departure to examine similar problems and prospects for education in other parts of the world. The task which I have set for myself in this report and in future travels is to see how men and women have confronted similar issues and to ask how their approaches can help us with our problems now and in the future. More to come in subsequent newsletters.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'I. J. Spitzberg', written in a cursive style.

Irving J. Spitzberg, L.

Received in New York on May 18, 1971.