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**WHO'S AFRAID OF THE INFORMATION WOLF ?
CAVEATS OF A UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATOR**

UNIVERSITY COLLECTION

Speech of
Donald R. McNeil,
Chancellor, University of Maine
Chairman, Information Exchange Procedures Steering Committee,
Information Exchange Procedures Task Force,
at the
National Center for Higher Education Management Systems
National Assembly, Denver, Colorado, September, 1972

INTRODUCTION

As the chief executive officer of the University of Maine, Dr. Donald R. McNeil must be concerned not only with academia as it relates to some 23,000 students but also with the administration of eight campuses and some 4,000 managerial, faculty, and support personnel. This latter responsibility has led to his association with such organizations as the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO), and others which have as a primary objective the improved management of higher educational institutions.

In the case of NCHEMS, Dr. McNeil chairs a steering committee on information exchange and reporting, an effort designed to establish a basis for the statistical evaluation of comparable educational institutions. On September 15, 1972, this responsibility brought him before an assembly of more than 700 administrators to explain the purpose, justification, and potential of this spearhead NCHEMS's project. His comments on the occasion are a bellwether for academician and administrator alike, of where current efforts to improve management may be taking higher education and a warning that these efforts must be carefully guided if higher education is to be served.

I always view with trepidation the opportunity to give a speech to people who know more about a subject than I, but then, as the Chancellor of the University of Maine, I do this all the time, so there's nothing really unusual about talking to people better informed than I.

First, let me state what the members of the Information Exchange Procedures Steering Committee considered to be our mission.

At the outset, we wondered if we were a company union assembled to certify and justify the activities of the Information Exchange Procedures Task Force. We quickly decided that we were not. We concluded that we were a watchdog committee—made up primarily of chief academic and administrative officers of higher educational systems. We are people who each day are confronted with the need for data to make intelligent decisions about the allocation of resources and then to justify those allocations.

I'd like to give you some of the reservations that, as a watchdog committee, we find ourselves expressing about the work of the IEP Task Force. Some of these are my own prejudices, and some are the prejudices of other members of the Committee. After that, I will describe what we think is in store for the IEP project.

As good academicians, we, of course, started by spending many hours wrestling with the definition of terms. We also had to ask ourselves the basic question: Shall there be an exchange of information? It took us only a couple of hours to decide. Yes, there had better be an exchange of information.

Higher Education is under attack. The myth is being spread across the land that we are inefficient; the myth is abroad that we're educating too many youngsters; and these are myths. So we felt that, yes, to meet our obligations as administrators, we certainly needed the right data to make the right decisions, and to justify the allocation of resources that state legislators and the Congress give to us in order to educate millions of Americans.

Next, we got into the argument of whether we're talking about information exchange or information reporting, and this led to the question: Who are we going to be exchanging with and reporting to?

We decided that there is a very fine line between exchange and reporting, and that whatever we called it, we had a major responsibility to several groups. We are obligated to report to or exchange information with state legislatures. They are demanding information from us in order to set priorities between education and all of the other needs of society. We needed good data for our boards, for comparisons with other institutions of higher education, for statewide coordinating units of various stripes and for national organizations which require data for intelligent presentations before the Congress and to federal agencies. Lastly, and above all, we decided there must be exchange of information with and reporting to the general public.

With these basic questions out of the way, we then turned our attention to some disturbing thoughts about the intentions of the IEP project. I suppose that many of us started our work on this Committee feeling rather hostile toward the idea that finally we're going to have to qualify some values that many of us have made instinctive judgments about for years in higher education administration.

The first and basic fear was: Is the data collected going to be comparable and acceptable? There is the principle of the consent of the governed here. If we devise a system that may be acceptable only to a few units in society, then it isn't going to work. It has to be acceptable to *all* the people who are going to *use* the system as well as to the people who are being *described* by the system. If we're going to get data that's comparable, then we must look at all the variables in any study of costs. For instance, if a university pays great attention to support services or programs for the disadvantaged and a legislator sees only that the cost per student at this university is greater than that of another institution, and he hasn't discovered all the ways the two institutions are not comparable, then we're in trouble.

Second, the cost, we feared, might also become the sole basis for decision-making in the academic institution. I can't stress that fear too much. There are many other things that go into making decisions besides the cost.

Third, we feared that the information would be misused. An angry legislator, or an angry board member, we feared, might not go into sufficient detail to understand what the comparable data really meant.

Fourth, we feared that information exchange and reporting would promote a centralization and standardization that we might not want. There's always the problem of decreasing the autonomy of the parts of an institution, of eliminating and inhibiting vitality and diversity.

Fifth, we wondered if output can really be assessed. We pay a great deal of attention to quantity, but how, really, do you measure quality? You can measure student hours and faculty loads, but a professor in a classroom teaching students who are learning is quite a different matter than what the professor's salary is, or how many course hours he has. Interaction between the student and the professor is really at the heart of the learning process.

So we make the point: Let's not have quantity blown out of perspective, and let's pay attention to some of the *qualitative* factors in higher education. Those of you who have been in this business for some time know that as you visit Rotary clubs and Kiwanis clubs, people are constantly raising the question: How do you prove that you had three thousand truly educated people who walked off the platform in June? How these three thousand people act in society in the years to come is really the answer to that question, but the answer, of course, can't be given in July.

Sixth, the Steering Committee members worried about the collection of data superseding everything else. People develop a mania for the collection of data. Sometimes after reviewing data, I end up by saying, "That's very interesting, but we're going to make the decision this way anyway." We worried a great deal that we would develop this mania for data collection, and we would end up with huge files and computer printouts which we couldn't or wouldn't use.

Seventh, we worried about the *cost* of information exchange. I don't hear anyone talking about who's going to pay for all of this data collection for exchange and reporting. I know how it works in my University. It's coming right out of our hides. If we establish a data collecting agency with analysts and all of the rest, I don't see any funds forthcoming to do this except what comes out of other areas of our operations.

This matter of increased costs brings me to my eighth point: We fear another layer of bureaucracy, and that's a fear widely shared, believe me. Well, I suppose we can answer that by saying that we are already in the business of operating a bureaucracy, so what's new? The problem now is to master the bureaucracy and to make it work to our advantage.

Number nine: We feared that the standardization resulting from data collection and cost finding might become government by

formula; that it might stifle initiative and innovation on our campuses. We worried about things like induced course load matrices, with the implication that we might begin to say to students, "You cannot, if you are an engineer, because of cost data finding, take a course in early English poetry." Yet that might be the very course the student wanted to take, and he should be entitled to it. We worried about the possibility that a machine might govern the student's choice of what he wanted to do.

I know the answer to that—that it depends upon how you use the machine. But it's a fear we must express as academic administrators. Once again, we worry that we concentrate so much on quantity we're not paying enough attention to quality. One of our basic fears concerns differential pricing. People may point to medical schools, law schools, and dental schools and say, "Why we already have differential pricing." The problem may be posed: Because a philosophy course costs more, students are going to have to pay more for that than for some other course. We hear it expressed in the legislatures: Why don't we go in for differential pricing? When differential pricing begins, it will start with majors. Then, we fear it might be applied to courses. Differential pricing is all right if you run an elitist institution, but if you run an egalitarian institution, with tax support, open to all, such as mine, then I don't see how one can justify charging engineers more or less than English majors.

Last among our reservations was this: All the efficiency in the world, all the facts in the world and all the analysis in the world may not finally provide a good education. In one of the papers presented you heard the statement—"You can use your facility twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year, to maximum capacity, have the right amount of support services and all the rest, but you indeed may have a terrible educational system." And that's something we ought to worry about.

Let me run down briefly a few other points that came out of the Committee discussions.

In the first place, higher education administrators are really more efficient than many of you would have us believe. We *do* know something about data collecting; we do know something about planning. We know something about innovation and the re-allocation of resources. Please don't think that you have discovered the world all of a sudden because you have new formulas. I get the feeling sometimes that when management information systems are developed, the people involved start with the assumption that we've never done anything along the lines of what's being suggested. I say we have done a good deal.

My second point is a reminder that in education we are dealing with human beings. We are not selling soap; those are not packages coming out at the end of the line. They are human beings. When we start talking about universities and institutions only in terms of management information systems, we are on dangerous ground.

Number three: I really think you have to leave it to us, the academic administrators, to set our goals in a democratic manner involving the rest of the institution and the people supporting it. But all of the data that you're talking about has *got* to flow from those decisions about goals, and we can't let management information systems set the goals. Faculty, students, administrators, boards and alumni all have a part in these decisions.

Fourth: It may be a minor point, but I'm assuming that when you're talking about management information systems, you're talking about the totality of postsecondary education just as the federal laws are now talking about it. I assume you are talking about bringing private colleges, private universities, vocational technical institutes and proprietary schools into management information systems, so that we can get a total picture for the planning of the allocation of the resources of a state, or the nation, to education. Everyone should be playing under the same rules.

Fifth, you must leave us—the management information system must leave us—some flexibility. It would be tough to run an institution if you had an information system so rigid and centralized that a central authority might use it to control every purchase, every decision, every program change. Some flexibility is vital to innovation and change.

My last point is that I believe in accountability. But accountability is a two-way street, and what bothers me is that after we administrators get all of our data and all of our staff people have digested it, there is no promise from those who are doing the reviewing and making the judgment at the next level that they are going to take the time to go into the data in the same detail.

One of the reasons that we've become involved in management information systems is that we hope that with this new means of accountability we're going to convince those people who give us the money that they can work *with* us and not *against* us, and that we don't have to walk into a budget hearing and listen to them saying only what they *don't* want us to do. I think that the reviewing agencies have to take the time to understand the information in order to make fair judgments and to share in our goals.

Well, these reservations and caveats are important. But now, I want to turn to the positive side. I needn't dwell on these points



I am about to make because I think most of you are convinced of them. But to round out the picture, I shall list them in order to place the good work being done in perspective.

In the first place, as I listen to my colleagues in the higher education establishment, it seems to me that many of them are fearing the very facts they need to do the job. I don't think we can afford to fear those facts, which is why I have embraced some of these concepts we're working to implement. The questions are: How many facts? How will the facts be used? How do they help us?

I think that management information systems—that is, information exchange and reporting procedures—promote beneficial self-analysis on the part of academic administrators, and this has already occurred in my institution.

I think also that what we're doing gives us a fine tool for management, and I emphasize that word tool. It is not an end in itself, no matter how pretty and voluminous the computer printouts are. It is a tool that we will use, if it is well shaped, well analyzed, with good aggregates and comparable data. But it is only a tool. I think that these systems will tell us as managers how we can better allocate our resources and where the innovative needs to be done. I approve of that.

I believe that management information systems will enable us to be more accountable to the people to whom we go for money. Further, our credibility will be enhanced. I think that what we're doing with our data systems will help us explain our institutions to the public and reverse the anti-higher education trend that has been rampant in this country.

My final point is this: I guess you all know that maybe I ought to be making this speech to my fellow presidents and chancellors. If we who are most central to managing the operation are not going to get greatly involved in these ideas and really try to make them work—develop a creditable system that can be used to do all of the things I've talked about—then somebody with far less knowledge, far less sensitivity and quite different objectives will use whatever information is developed for ends we will not like.

The IEP Steering Committee and my colleagues around the country from state institutions will retain our skepticism about what the IEP Task Force is doing. Maybe we won't do what many of you think we should, but we are going to try to create a better information exchange system. I think in the process we're going to see better education offered to the people of America.

Thank you very much.