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# Looking for Help Long Overdue: Where Has Higher Education Been?

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# Looking for Help Long Overdue

## WHERE HAS HIGHER EDUCATION BEEN?

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or more than a decade, the American public has carped and complained about the condition of American education. Some have gone so far as to wring their hands over the apparent futility of reform efforts. Overall, the nation has found the state of its public elementary and secondary education unacceptable. It has especially lamented the tragic condition of urban public schools, yet it does not seem to know what to do about it.

Higher education has been under siege as well, essentially because of its high costs. (As John Powers asks, "The \$100,000 question is, 'Is a college education worth the price?'") In addition, higher education has been criticized for its inability to chart a clear course for internal curriculum reform – specifically with regard to multicultural education versus a "revised" version of the great books list. Nevertheless, most of those who comment on the condition of our colleges and universities are almost smug when they compare them to their European and Asian counterparts. Whatever the trouble in K–12 classrooms, higher education still seems to draw the ambitious and cognitively alert, to stand at the frontier of research, to produce great discoverers and Nobel Prize winners. Those who speak on behalf of our colleges and universities consistently boast about their high quality. Our colleges and universities have scored major successes in private fund drives, and they have been reasonably successful in maintaining their priority status for public funding.

But herein lies the question: If K–12 education is in such desperate straits and if higher education is more than surviving – and if the economic well-being of the country and its citizens is dependent on high quality throughout the educational process – then why doesn't the seemingly healthier partner more frequently extend its hand to its weak and ailing counterpart?

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De la Solle Academy

Engaging students in the learning process is critical to keeping them in "the education pipeline."

The issue takes on special urgency since it is self-evident (or so our economists tell us) that America's economic recovery depends on the effective upgrading of our human resources, now the key factor for ensuring our continued material well-being. This urgency is compounded by another self-evident fact (or so our psychologists tell us) that the dramatic improvement of our human skills and the subsequent adjustment of behavior patterns appropriate to our modern culture depend on treating the entire educational process as a continuum, from early childhood, through schooling and college, to lifelong learning. Each component must be closely linked and grounded in a conscious appreciation of the missions, tasks, and pedagogies of the others.

Given these two self-evident propositions, the absence of an ad-

equated relief effort on the part of higher education seems almost criminal. The obvious questions to be answered include:

- Why the dismal response by higher education?
- What are the consequences of the present half-hearted efforts?
- What might higher education do next to help?

#### **What's to blame?**

The short answer to why K-12 education is in such distress and why higher education has been little more than a passive bystander is threefold. First, both realms are extremely fragmented — by geographical location, by division between the public and private sectors, and by religious denominations. Hence, it is difficult to cre-

are a coherent educational "act." Second, this fragmentation first prompts and then requires a fiercely competitive spirit, which often thwarts even tentative efforts at collaboration. Third, K-12 and higher education are indeed two very different cultures. Compounding the cultural differences is the fact that while the teachers and administrators in one realm are overwhelmingly female and middle class, those in the other tend to be male and upper-middle class.

The fragmentation that besets both levels of American education confounds European and Asian colleagues, who generations (if not centuries) ago knit together truly national educational enterprises which to this day systematically oversee the human development process. In contrast, we in the United States remain committed to the grassroots ideologies of localism and private entrepreneurship. As of 1992, the United States boasted 15,358 public school districts, 81,746 elementary and secondary public schools, 22,690 private schools, 1,567 public colleges and universities, and 1,992 private colleges and universities.

More than 80,000 schools are governed by approximately 15,000 local school boards and committees. Given that the management of the more than 22,000 private and parochial schools is a mixed bag as far as oversight and authority are concerned, and given, too, that almost all of the more than 3,000 colleges and universities (public and private) have their own boards of trustees, the United States may be found to have a total of nearly 20,000 quasi-autonomous educational decision-making bodies. (Note that this figure does not include the governing bodies of the 6,455 non-collegiate schools!)

These bodies may be increasingly dependent on state funding or private generosity for support, and they may be responsive to higher education policy guidance with regard to curriculum reform, accreditation, and personnel qualifications. But they also make real decisions on a variety of "hot-button" issues, such as school prayer, condoms, and tracking. Given this crazy quilt of policy makers, the challenge for comprehensive intervention is awesome indeed. One tampers with the ideology of the grassroots and the "independent" college at one's peril.

The second force, again ideological, that pits itself against the self-evident propositions of economic necessity and a comprehensive educational strategy is the compulsion of the marketplace. In K-12 education, the "voucher system" is currently in vogue. (An even more explicit laissez faire cum advertising version looms on the horizon in the form of Whittle's pay-to-learn "Project Edison.")<sup>1</sup> In higher education, the institutional battle cry is "find the niche," so intense is the intercollegiate admissions competition in the face of the rapidly diminishing 18- to 24-year-old age group. Alternatively, institutions collaborate in cartel-like conspiracy to such a degree that a few years ago, the government launched an effective anti-trust suit against several of them. As financial pressures intensify, it will be the rare campus that does not embark on niche-place advertising that skirts dangerously close to violating truth-in-advertising laws.

Along with education's commitment to grassroots sovereignty and marketplace superiority, cultural dissidence is a third force pushing K-12 and higher education apart. Public schools recruit teachers who are state certified by

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schools of education, begin their careers in the classroom, and work their way up the ladder to principal- and superintendentships. As they move up, the men seem to outdistance the women — even though the majority of teachers are women. Teachers' social origins are overwhelmingly middle class, and for half a century, teachers and administrators alike have tended to be union people. They are organized, they have contracts with management, and — as almost every big-city resident knows — come September, they strike, hitting the bricks at the most agonizing time for parents. With the contracts specifying in detail the hour at which they must leave school, who supervises the cafeteria, and how many authorized days with pay there are for family funerals, the culture of K-12 education is that of hard-working, decent people who are "labor."

In contrast, the ranks of higher education are filled primarily by the sons (and some daughters) of upper-middle class — or even upper-class — families.<sup>2</sup> Overall, they are higher in social rank than their counterparts in business or government. Blue-collar scholars break into academia only rarely. Overt economic advancement is not a high priority; administrative positions typically are disparaged. And although faculty unions are the rule in public colleges and universities, the collective bargaining process tends to involve legislatures and governors rather than academic executives.

Given these several differences, communication between the "working stiffs" of the K-12 and higher education camps — teachers and faculty members — does not come easily. A strong sense of the old television series *Upstairs, Downstairs* dominates

well-meaning College Board groups that assemble with the objective of easing the transition between the sectors. "Not our class, dear" (NOCD) prevails, even if it is long gone from other American institutions.

### **The consequences**

It is not quite fair to say that higher education has done nothing to structure a more coherent and systemic process of education. Since 1983, when the three major clarion calls for reform (*A Nation at Risk*, *Making the Grade*, and *Action for Excellence*) made headlines in a single fortnight, many colleges and universities have expressed "concern." Together with large private corporations and liberal business associations, they have announced their commitment to K-12 education by authorizing research, presenting agendas, and proposing partnerships. Some of the joint ventures were court ordered, as was the case in Boston in the mid-1970s, when Judge Arthur Garrity ordered the "pairing" of area colleges and universities with designated Boston high schools.<sup>3</sup> Others were collaborative actions by a select number of university schools of education, which, stung by the harsh criticisms of the "Big Three" reports, came together in The Holmes Group. For ten years, The Holmes Group has sought to clarify the mission of schools, colleges, and departments of education, to enhance the professional training of educators, to disseminate research findings, and to establish a limited number of professional development schools, all with a sharp focus on the schools and their teachers as prime agents of reform.

Perhaps the most consistent link between K-12 and higher education has been The College

Board, which was established in 1900. The College Board administers and monitors the standard aptitude and achievement tests that are the principal rites of passage between secondary school and higher education. The trustees of The College Board, who represent 2,500 K-12 and higher education institutions, are the principal mechanism for communication between the sectors. In 1983, jolted by the reports, then College Board President George Hanford conceived of Project Equality, which was designed to ensure the academic preparedness of and equal opportunity for all students. Teams of teachers and faculty prepared six booklets covering the basic academic subjects, from English to foreign languages, in which they described "what students need to know and be able to do" in each subject. These booklets later became the subject of regional dialogues in which participants sought common ground with regard to curricular expectations.

Individual "stars" from the higher education world also captured public and professional attention in the 1980s as the lurch toward high-quality education continued. TheodoreSizer, Diane Ravitch, Jonathan Kozol, Checker Finn, and Christine Rossell, among others, wrote serious though widely varying prescriptions for improving K-12 education and revamping its curricula. Sizer's prescriptions became operative in his Essential Schools network. Ravitch served as assistant secretary of education in the Bush administration, and Finn joined Project Edison. Yet these were personal – not institutional – ventures. Perforce they chose a "trickle across" theory of comprehensive reform, persuading one district af-



ter another to realize the virtue of their remedies.

In truth, none of the well-meaning efforts of college and university presidents, or of schools and colleges of education, or of individual commentators (liberal or conservative) actually addressed the basic forces of fragmentation, competition, and cultural persuasion. Moreover, none engaged the power centers of higher education: arts and sciences faculty members. The focus of reform remained the individual teacher, the solitary classroom, the free-standing school. Just as the post-Sputnik curriculum reform effort left K-12 institutions intact and contemptuously strove to design teacher-proof "New Physics" and "New Math" courses, the 1980s witnessed little effort to consider a national strategy of structural reform. The Elementary and Secondary Education Acts of the 1960s finally engaged the federal government in compensatory education, but no

structural reform emerged. In fact, in the *Miliken* case, the Supreme Court essentially stopped desegregation programs at the Detroit city line, thereby allowing white suburbs to evade responsibility. Hence, in recent years, from the publication of the three reform reports to the Bush administration's "America 2000" proclamation, the prescription has been for more teachers, more schools, more competition via vouchers, and more condescending advice from college faculty to hard-pressed teachers in their 80,000 specific sites. And interspersed with the advice have been continuing complaints about the inferior quality of high school graduates' educations. Real efforts to help have been, in fact, left to newly graduated BAs who have followed the siren call of an energetic and innovative Princeton senior to "Teach for America."<sup>11</sup>

In summary, only the weakest links in higher education became involved in the pretentious, over-

elaborate, frequently bombastic, and occasionally raucous debates over education reform in the 1980s. Purple prose abounded, but the most significant actors were high school guidance counselors and admissions deans, a covey of consultants typically drawn from schools of education, and well-meaning but easily distracted university presidents. Each of these groups proved to have only a limited capacity to effect change. The real centers of academic power – the departments in the traditional arts and sciences disciplines – remained untouched. In the few cases in which the schools of education appeared likely to intrude on the prevailing distribution of resources and thereby to upset staffing calculations or the availability of research grants, the response was overwhelmingly negative. Indeed, except for complaining about the inadequate preparation of freshmen (when they taught freshmen), senior professors hardly acknowledged – and perhaps did not even recognize – the true dimensions of the nation's educational plight. Some may have smirked at the Bush goal to make the United States number one in 12th-grade math competence by the year 2000, but more were not even aware of the proclamation of that impossible dream. Instead, they were engrossed in the internal debates of multiculturalism versus great books, the politics inspired by deconstructionism, and the ivory laboratories of the hard sciences. These – and money – were sufficient problems for higher education's agenda.

### What might higher education do next to help?

Sifting through the dismal record of unconcern that characterizes the

decision-making and power centers in most higher education institutions today, it is difficult to conclude on an optimistic note.

Preoccupied by concerns of fiscal solvency and philosophical debate, college and university administrators appear unlikely to effectively support K-12 education's reform efforts.

But if the crisis is genuine, and if higher education leaders want to play a larger role in solving the crisis, they might consider three strategies:

- stronger support for schools of education;
- direct involvement of college and university faculty in K-12 programs, including an explicit recognition of this service component in tenure and promotion decisions; and
- stronger political support for the efforts of other decision makers to bring about more fundamental changes.

The first alternative locus of decision making lies with the 50 states, and here the recent reform record shows promise. Most states have moved toward equalizing school district financial bases, upgrading teacher qualifications and compensation, and maintaining compensatory education. More impressively, the movement toward regionalization has spread so that larger districts are now in the offing. And in a few states, notably New Jersey, the state has declared local systems bankrupt and taken them over. If regionalization can be extended so that affordable housing is a required component in every suburb's zoning, the pressure on urban schools may be further reduced.

Since the states wield substantial authority over land-grant and community colleges, further links might be mandated as new priorities are announced to campus authorities. Schools of education, as well as English and biochemistry departments, might receive special attention.

Now that its cabinet office of education seems to be a permanent fixture, the federal government can do more than support students requiring aid or encourage the use of vouchers. A targeted, fully funded, mission-specific, goals-oriented program of support for urban schools could also help the real heroes and heroines of K-12 education: big-city school superintendents.

The odds of moving from the top down, of setting aside grassroots sovereignty, and of restraining embridled competition are not especially favorable, either. But they do suggest a fighting chance. And a fighting chance is more than higher education has been willing to offer, even after a full decade of opportunities ignored, disparaged, and set aside in its pursuit of lesser ambitions. ■

<sup>1</sup> Project Edison is a \$2.5 billion effort to build 1,000 for-profit schools paid for by private investors.

<sup>2</sup> Bowen, Howard R. and Jack Schuster. *American Professors*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986. See also Seymour, Daniel. *The Divided Academy: Professors in Politics*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1975.

<sup>3</sup> Wood, Robert. *Remedial Law: When Courts Become Administrators*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> "Teach for America," founded in 1989 by Wendy Kopp, recruits non-education majors to teach for two years in U.S. public schools.