DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 443 332 HE 033 087


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TITLE Tides and Trends in Higher Education.


INSTITUTION Georgia Univ., Athens. Inst. of Higher Education.

PUB DATE 1991-00-00

NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Fall Conference of the Jackson State University (Mississippi, August 19, 1991).

AVAILABLE FROM Institute of Higher Education, Candler Hall, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602; Tel: 404-542-3464.

PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Accountability; Age Differences; *Cultural Pluralism; *Diversity (Student); *Educational Change; Educational Quality; *Educational Trends; *Futures (of Society); *Higher Education; Public Opinion; Public Support; Science and Society; Teacher Characteristics; Teacher Competencies; Values



ABSTRACT

This paper examines changes in American higher education, using the metaphor of ocean tides. The tides of change in the 1980s included public demands for assessment and accountability; fairness and credibility in advantages and benefits; improved quality of education; effectiveness and efficiency; assurance that college graduates were personally effective and outstanding participants in society; and improved quality of life. American colleges and universities continually struggled in the undertow of national tides to deal with unexpected shifts in areas such as cultural pluralism; rising costs of higher education; loss of public support for and understanding of education; and changing roles of teachers. Changes in the shorelines of higher education include the aging of the professoriate; aging physical facilities; older, part-time students; pluralistic student populations; declining basic learning skills; and diverse learning habits, motives, and values. The monograph offers the hope that national optimism and confidence in the 21st century will be restored by the flood tides of the 1990s, including the 500th anniversary of the discovery of America; continuing technological and cultural change; international cooperation within a global economy; internationalization of undergraduate curricula; and planning and preparing for the 21st century. (SM)

# TIDES AND TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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This paper was presented to the faculty and professional staff of the Jackson State University on August 19, 1991. The title was suggested by President Herman B. Smith, Jr. in his invitation to give the keynote address at JSU's annual fall conference.

## TIDES AND TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Let me begin with a quote from a classic you will quickly recognize: Rachel Carson's *The Sea Around Us* (a book that has recently been re-issued in a special edition by Oxford University Press):

> There is no drop of water in the ocean, not even in the deepest part of the abyss, that does not know and respond to the mysterious forces that create the tide. No other force that affects the sea is so strong (p.129).

The waves created on the surface by high winds are felt at no more than 100 fathoms deep, she tells us, and the tides are strongest when the sun, the moon, and the earth are aligned. Though many times larger, the sun does not exert the influence that the moon does. The tides are weakest when the three bodies are at a different apex of a triangle formed by their respective positions.

Several pages later, Ms. Carson writes:

> The truth of the matter is that local topography is all-important in determining the features that to our minds make "the tide." The attractive force of the heavenly bodies sets the water in motion, but how, and how far, and how strongly it will rise depends upon such things as the slope of the bottom, the depth of the channel, or the width of a bay's entrance (p.151).

Let me now propose, for the sake of discussion, that the tides in American higher education are public perceptions, expectations, and values. The changing needs, demands, preferences, and interests of the public and higher education's many constituencies are very much like the changing tides. They come and go—and come back again—and eventually they make a profound difference in shape, size, structure, and functions. Colleges and universities are very much like the inlets, bays, and channels into which the changing tides flow—and they do indeed provide "the local topography" that is all-important!

**Changing Tides**

If we look at the many changes in public demands and expectations during the 1980s, we see a pervasive concern with assessment and accountability. The general public and our numerous constituencies are seeking assurance that the advantages and benefits of a college education are: (1) distributed *fairly,* and (2) still *credible* in the world offcampus. They would like factual evidence that our colleges and universities are both *effective* (in realizing their various purposes) and *efficient* (in their use of valuable public resources).

In particular, the general public would like assurance that college graduates are personally effective *and* outstanding participants in our society and economy. Colleges should prepare, they believe, citizens who are responsive to societal needs and competent in the response. Public leaders in business, industry, and finance want a more *productive and creative workforce* that will restore the competitive edge that has been lost in international competition. And all of us, if we are sane and sober, want improvements in the quality of our personal and professional lives.

If we look closely at the nation's colleges and universities, we see them struggling in the undertow of national tides. Institutional leaders must deal with dramatic shifts that they did not expect and forms of *cultural pluralism* that they do not understand. In matters of academic accreditation they must meet standards that are uniform and yet, they must foster and encourage forms of *diversity* that many observers regard as the major strength of American higher education. All institutions are under intense pressure to assess educational outcomes, and a majority of institutions report that they are doing so.

Students, parents, taxpayers, and institutional sponsors are concerned about the *increasing costs* of higher education. Elected officials recall the increased allocations of past years and cannot detect "a good fit" between public costs and public outcomes. Many are convinced that the public is not getting a fair rate of return on its investment.

Oncampus leaders recognize that during the 1980s we lost much of the *public understanding and support* we once had. They are challenged to regain public understanding and approval—and to re-establish lines of communication (and financial support) that are faulty. To improve the quality of higher education, colleges and universities must have better

## THE CHANGING TIDES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

**TIDES: Public Demands and Expectations for:**

— Assessment and accountability

— Fairness and credibility in advantages and benefits

— Improved quality in undergraduate education

— Effectiveness *and* efficiency

— Personal effectiveness and excellence

— Responsive and competent citizens

— A creative and productive workforce

— Improved quality of life

**UNDERTOWS: The Challenge of:**

— Demographic shifts and cultural pluralism

— Accreditation standards and institutional diversity

— Assessing educational outcomes

— Increasing costs of education

— Regaining public understanding and support

— Strengthening elementary and secondary education

— Stronger ties between education and employment

— Enhancing the role of college teachers

prepared students and thus, we have an urgent national need to strengthen elementary and secondary education. To prepare *a more creative and productive workforce*, institutions of higher education must have stronger ties to the world of work and better support from the business corporations who hire college graduates.

In the midst of such activity, there is a continuing struggle to enhance the *status and role of college teachers.* For many institutional leaders, the likely outcome is discouraging. Faculty incentives and rewards are often at variance with *good teaching*—irrespective of how the two concepts may be defined. Presidents, deans, and department heads cannot inspire faculty members who are subjected to policies of "publish or perish" by their own faculty colleagues. And yet, there are encouraging signs that college instruction can and will be improved in the years ahead.

**The Changing Shoreline**

A careful examination of the shorelines in higher education will reveal a ubiquitous "ageing process." Professors *and* their students are getting older—along with campus facilities and instructional equipment. Despite the recency with which many campuses were opened, far too many classroom buildings are in a state of disrepair. Deferred maintenance throughout the 1980s has taken a heavy toll on many campuses; a greying professoriate has teaching and research interests that do not always match the learning needs and interests of students. As the maturity of students increases, the needs of students may or may not become more compatible with faculty interests. The potential for conflict continues.

As student populations become more pluralistic, there will be increasing demands for further diversity in course and program offerings. More students will arrive on college campuses with different expectations for: (1) what they study and learn, (2) how and when they learn, and (3) how they are assessed and judged by their instructors. Unfortunately for classroom instructors, more students will lack the basic academic competencies they need for easy transition to higher levels of learning. Many of them will have *diverse* (and conflicting) learning *habits, motives,* and *values.*

Where in such changing features do we find signs of encouragement? One such sign may be our "rapidly retiring professoriate"—the generation of college faculty members who were educated in the 1950s and

## TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

**Changing Features of the Shoreline:**

— The greying professoriate

— Aging physical facilities and campuses

— Older, part-time students (adults learners)

— Pluralistic student populations

— Declining basic skills of learning

— Diverse learning habits, motives, values!

**The Flood Tides of the 1990s:**

— The 500th anniversary of the discovery of America

— Continuing technological and cultural change

— International cooperation within a global economy

— Internationalization of undergraduate curricula

— Planning and preparing for the 21st century!

1960s. Faculty members who were first appointed in 1964 will have thirty years of teaching experience in 1994—and many will be attracted to retirement benefits they "cannot refuse." Most will be replaced by younger faculty members who should bring different perspectives to college classrooms—and, we should trust, more seriousness of purpose in the improvement of undergraduate education.

As public resources that are essential to international cooperation in a global economy, institutions of higher education will be increasingly prominent and more properly appreciated in the 1990s than they were in the 1980s. Human resources development—the economist's term for education, training, and personal development—is increasingly recognized as a crucial component in multinational solutions to global problems. Despite setbacks, the global economy is expected to "boom" in the 1990s—and institutions of higher education will prosper if they are prepared to participate.

**The Rising Tide**

There are many forthcoming events that should restore the nation's optimism and confidence in its preparations for the 21st century. In 1992 the nation will observe the 500th anniversary of the discovery of the new world—and there will be many, many re-affirmations of national and family ties to Europe. In the same year (not by coincidence!) the nations of western Europe will establish themselves as the world's third largest market and provide a welcome counterbalance (it is hoped) to the economic supremacy of Japan.

Competition and cooperation within a global economy that is technology driven will involve many forms of technological and cultural change. Each of these changes will bear directly or indirectly on the status, missions, and roles of American colleges and universities. No region, state, or community will be unaware of significant and substantive changes in international affairs and relations. The full participation of higher education will bring an intensified concern with other societies and nations, numerous efforts to "globalize" or "internationalize" college curricula, and various forms of intercultural exchange (students, faculty, programs, services, and activities).

Throughout the 1990s we can expect an active concern with the assessment of institutional effectiveness. Public demands and expectations

will influence, in many ways, the preparations we make for "a new century" and "a different kind of world." In similar manner, public perceptions and expectations will result in many efforts to assess the progress made by institutions of higher education. From all such efforts we should gain a different kind of public understanding and support—and we should enhance, in many measurable *and* immeasurable ways, the quality of postsecondary and higher education.

In discussing the rising tides of the future, it is tempting to continue the analogy by raising a number of other questions about what the tide brings in and what its long-term effects are. For examples:

1. Who are the surfers who merely take advantage of the incoming tide? Football Saturdays bring to our campuses many clients, users, and supporters who "use our institutions" for many personal and enjoyable reasons. Many others use our campuses for less worthy purposes.

2. Who are the flotsam and jetsam from the larger "sea of life" that wash up on "our shores?" All of us are familiar with the incredible "wreckage and waste" that is now part of the human condition.

3. Who are the grunions? At least one specie of fish has adapted fully to the movements of the tide and use the brief intervals between waves to perpetuate their species.

4. What do our coral reefs consist of?—and how rapidly are they building up? In the outer waters of our society there are still too many barriers (natural and human) to access and equity in higher education.

5. What can we do to restructure in beneficial ways the "Local Topography?" There are many changing tides *and* many forces that alter the distinctive *and* common features of our colleges and universities. Some of these forces are events and processes to which we can adjust (or accommodate) but which we cannot turn back or successfully resist. Other forces are "of our own making" and there is much that we can do to re-structure the "local topography" of American institutions of higher education. Our greatest challenge may be our ability *and* our willingness to make meaningful distinctions between such forces and act accordingly!

## References

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## Purpose and Functions

The Institute of Higher Education is a service, instructional, and research agency of the University of Georgia. Established in 1964, the Institute cooperates with other agencies and institutions in the development of higher education. Programs and services help prepare professionally trained personnel in higher education, assist other colleges and universities in numerous ways, and study the organizational and functional processes of institutions and programs of higher education.

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