The Bangladesh Times

18 AUG 1993

A paradox in education

by DEREK BOK

PART TWO

How about "runaway tuition increases" as a source of disaffection? Despite the popular outcry, it is simply a fact that tuitions did not rise as fast in relation to the cost of living in the '80s as they did in the "50s.The controversy about federally funded scientific research? Despite the unfortunate mistakes of some universities in billing the government for costs only marginally related to research, I am positive that accounting practices for research funds were much more primitive in the '50s and '60s than they are today. Universities are also assuming more of the costs of research than they did then—yet there was much less criticism on that point than there is today.

Even the quality of education has improved. Student bodies are certainly more diverse and more interesting. The variety of courses in the catalog is infinitely broader. The readings are more extensive. The services and extracurricular activities are richer and more varied. In short, even making allowances for the partisan biases of an unrepentant college president like myself, I simply do not see evidence of any decline in the performance of US colleges and universities.

Another explanation for the current storm of criticism is that conservatives have been in power. Conservatives, as we know, are naturally hostile to institutions that they believe, with some justice, to be bastions of the liberal ideas they actively dislike. That is a tempting theory: conservatives have been in power, and they certainly do disapprove of many ideas expressed prominently at universities. But it fails to explain why universities were not savagely criticized in the '50s, when conservatives were also in power, or why they escaped so lightly (comparatively speaking) in the early '70s during the Nixon Administration, when they gave much greater provocation than today.

Moreover, it is important to remember that conservatives are not the only people who are critical. If you were to examine the people buying the late Allan Bloom's book about nihilism in academics, The Closing of the American Mind (1987), or reacting to all the other charges with great glee, you would find that the critics are not all conservative. The liberals are upset that educators are not making more rapid progress in advancing women and especially minorities within America's institutions. The middle-class professionals are concerned about rising tuition fees, affirmative action programs that reserve admission slots for minorities, and all the other trends they think are going to make it harder for their own children to get into the colleges of their choice. Blue-collar workers continue to regard universities as privileged enclaves filled with pampered students and outspoken professors who flaunt values and lifestyles that many working people find deeply offensive. And stalwarts of the status quo and potentates in powerful corporations do not like many of the criticisms some ebullient professors make in their appointed role as social critics.

The fact is that universities are deeply irritating to many groups—as they always have been. And yet the point remains: they are being criticized now as they were not 10,20, or 30 years ago.

But some people will say I have missed the most important point: the difference today is that the mood of all of these groups has gotten a great deal worse. People are cranky because the country is not doing well. The economy is lagging, unemployment is up, the United States is not conquering drugs, crime, or homelessness. So everybody is upset. In such an atmosphere, of course people are bound to be critical. There is some truth here; the mood is sour, and people are indeed cranky. Still, remember that all this criticism of higher ducation began in the mid 1980s when the United States was in its fifth consecutive year of economic growth, and things looked rosy.

In short, I think the conventional theories don't quite wash. There is something in them, but not enough to convince me that we fully understand what is going on. Out of my dissatisfaction with these explanations, let me try to articulate a deeper sense of what is bothering people and how educators might try to go about putting matters right.

My analysis begins with a problem long familiar to higher education's insiders that has only recently come to be understood clearly by the public at large. Notwithstanding the improvements that may have taken place in the quality of undegraduate education in the United States., the public has finally come to believe quite strongly that its institutions—particularly its leading universities—are not making the education of students a top priority. This is especially true for undergraduates in arts and sciences programs.

University leaders have tended to be silent on this issue, as far as public discourse is concerned. They have not offered a compelling vision of what they are trying to accomplish for students. They are quick to produce catalogs and programs and brochures, but are loath to speak of how students can use these many courses and activities to achieve more fundamental goals. What do professors and administrators say to parents who wonder about some rather basic things, such as how is this institution going to help my child think more clearly, be a more moral human being, find some satisfying vocation in life, or embrace values that will help him or her make intelligent choices?

When the public presses educators to go beyond platitudes, their responses aren't convincing. There are not very many coherent answers out there; there are not even articulate spokesmen, since so many university leaders are heavily burdened with raising money and administering their huge institutions. Instead, there is a void within which the charges of critics reverberate.

But I do not think the problem is merely one of communication. There is also a kernel of truth to what the public suspects. Universities may be paying as much attention to the quality of education as they did 30 years ago—but the fact is that they did not pay enough attention the, and they are not paying enough attention now. Although there are smaller colleges where teaching remains the overriding priority, in the modern university the incentives are not weighted in favour of teaching and education—indeed, quite the contrary is true.

As we all know, the prizes the media recognition, the extra income do not come from working with students or engaging in exemplary teaching. And it is not just the professors' incentives that are distorted, but also those of administrators. What presidents and deans are held accountable for is improving the prestige of their institutions, and that prestige comes from the research reputation of their faculties. If you are going to do your best to attract the ablest scientists and scholars to your faculty—to make them happy and keep them from going off to the next university—you do not want to provoke them with talk about spending more time on their teaching. And so administrators, too, often relegate the interests of undergraduates to the background.

There are many everyday signs that betray these priorities. When we go to recruit a star professor, the bargaining chip is always a reduced teaching load—never a reduced research load.

To be continued