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Higher education in transition

by STANLEY ROTHMAN

PART TWO

The influence of academics is no longer limited to the classroom. They are called upon as consultants to government, and the media now turn to them for independent expert opinion on various issues. They write for a variety of "intellectual" journals of opinion, some of which have a fairly extensive readership among leadership groups, and they are welcome on the opinion pages of The New York Times and The Washington Post.

The relationship between the national media and the academic community has been reciprocal. If journalists now turn to academic and other intellectuals, the intellectual community has fully embraced the media. Academic styles have changed as the professoriate competes for media attention. At one point a good book was supposed to make its way in the profession by itself; now some academic authors make efforts to be interviewed on television talk shows and to attract reviews by large-circulation journals. Scientific bodies hold press conferences to obtain attention. As a result, the structure of influence within the academic profession has changed. In the past, professional success was determined by publication in peer-reviewed journals. Today, these may easily be bypassed, and both promotions and grants can depend upon media coverage.

By the 1950s research and publication in one's field had become a major source of social mobility for academics, and to that they directed their energies. No longer was the school a community of teachers and students; rather it had become a place (even at liberal-arts colleges) in which, for the best members of the faculty, academic publication and prestige in one's field were the primary goals. The sense of community that had once characterized American colleges and universities had eroded, a process that continues today.

Except for the periods of the American Revolution and Civil War, American college and university students have been remarkably unpolitical. Most upper-middle-class students at elite institutions continued to rely on the college or university as a means of confirming status, and generations of the children of immigrants used higher education as a means of social mobility and becoming more American. If they engaged in any rebellion, it was against the old country ways of their parents.

STUDENT PROTESTS

By the late 1950s and early '60s core curricula had all but disappeared, though at many institutions watered-down sets of requirements remained in force. The acceptance of the "gentlemen's C" grade at many elite institutions was no longer so widespread, in part because the GI Bill for veterans and increasing government and private scholarships brought to the elite universities a new breed of hardworking lower-middle-class and working-class students. These students could now enter elite universities because admissions standards had changed. Once a bastion of Protestant sensibility, elite universities were now admitting students on "objective bases," relying heavily on school grades and standardized test scores, rather than estimates of character.

While in some ways the faculty's focus on research and writing may have contributed to better teaching from a purely academic perspective, the old personal nexus between student and teacher was weakened. The in loco parentis function of universities diminished as parietal and other rules (including compulsory collegewide meetings, a remnant of the old required chapels) were watered down. State and many private universities grew rapidly in size from 5,000 to 10,000 to 30,000 students. Inevitably, universities of that size were rather impersonal institutions.

Perhaps most importantly, the new "liberal cosmopolitan" orientation triumphed, suggesting other ways of living. Many large universities (such as the University of California, Berkeley) developed a substantial core of young people hanging around on their fringes. These people were often perpetual graduate students, taking a course or two, and eking out an existence with now-and-then jobs, welfare checks, or parental support. Adopting expressive individualism as a lifestyle, they joined the counterculture and refused to commit themselves to the workaday world.

In the early 1960s U.S. universities were in what seemed to be an excellent position. The prestige of intellectuals was at an all-time high, and student bodies at ever-growing institutions seemed to be improving every year as merit and scholarship became key values. Then, in the middle and late '60s, universities exploded. The proximate causes were the civil rights revolution and, a little later, the Vietnam War. The first was important because of the increasing identification of students with the downtrodden who, they claimed, were ignored by the society. The second was important because it was a war that students believed to be unjust, yet for which they might be drafted.

The rebellion was, at least in part, against America's liberal Protestant culture—its collective superego. All the evil an America was, the student radicals insisted, ultimately a function of repressive capitalism. Drawing upon ideas developed by Charles Reich, Herbert Marcuse, and others writing about social change, they wanted to replace capitalism with expressive individualism (including the freedom to experiment with drugs and to be supported by the system) and some sort of "participatory" socialism. At the same time they claimed that they desired a society that fully incorporated black people, other minorities, and women.

Students' demands on the universities were generally met, though often only after sit-ins or demonstrations. Parietal rules were eliminated, as were, in some universities, the remnants of course distribution requirements. To avoid possible conflict, speakers of a conservative stripe were not invited to campuses. A good many universities and colleges eliminated any connections with the U.S. military.

With the end of the Vietnam War, college campuses became quiet again. However, old understandings did not return. Voluntary military officer training for students may have been restored in some places, but parietal rules were not. Indeed, the ground was being paved for a further assault on tradition by 1960s activists who had chosen academia as a career. During the 1970s black and women's studies departments proliferated. Elite and other institutions competed intensively for the few blacks earning advanced degrees. The evidence indicates that, given equally qualified candidates, many colleges and universities preferred to hire the minority and/or female candidate before a white male.

The same was true for student admissions. While elite schools became less likely to admit students with very low scores on college entrance tests, they continued to favor African-American candidates. Even so, they simply could not, in many cases, meet the recruitment goals they and the government had set. To give the impression that goals for minorities (which sometimes became quotas) had been met, colleges and universities went out of their way to recruit high-scoring Asian and women students.

Criticism of affirmative action programs to recruit minorities was considered taboo at many universities and colleges, as were criticisms of black and women's study programs. In these programs and elsewhere, the theoretical bases of the curriculum were being redefined. European philosophy and literature (sometimes even science) came under attack as providing a racist, male-dominated picture of the world. In addition, it was alleged, various marginal groups, such as blacks and native Americans were being left out of discussions of world and American history, as were women.

Toward the end of the 1980s, it became an offense to act in any way (including speech) that might hurt the feelings of any group defined as a minority. New programs also were instituted that were designed to increase the proportion of minority students and faculty on campuses (especially elite campuses) and, it was asserted, to make them more comfortable. These programs were partly a response to the fact that the proportion of black students on many campuses had declined since the late 1960s, or at least had not grown. Justifications were also found in the argument that students had to learn to live with culturally diverse groups, since they would work together after college.

MULTICULTURAL STUDIES

The same argument was used on many campuses—Stanford, most notoriously—to justify redesigning courses associated with reading the great books to promote a concern with the literature of non-European peoples. Western culture, it was argued, was the culture of white male racists and antigays. Students had to be made aware of this even as they were made aware of the contributions of other societies. Such awareness would help the dominant whites even as it built up the self-esteem of minority students and hence improved their ability to learn.

Colleges and universities have also developed new rules and regulations designed to prevent members of the student body and faculty from making "insensitive remarks" that might psychologically injure minority persons. In some cases rules were adopted that prohibited the use of insulting epithets. In other cases, they went much further, prohibiting the use of "stereotypes" (i.e., general group characterizations).

Extreme forms of the new censorship were stopped in their tracks. A student at the University of Michigan, supported by the American Civil Liberties Union, filed suit against a new regulation. The federal court ruled that such limits violated First Amendment guarantees of free speech. Given this decision, administrations at public institutions quickly retreated.

This by no means to say that colleges and universities are free of the kind of censorship that is a function of the agressiveness of powerful minorities. The atmosphere at many colleges is such that students are afraid to speak in socially and politically "incorrect" ways, and faculty, despite the protection of tenure, tend to avoid controversial issues.

To be continued

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