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BETWEEN EXCELLENCE AND EQUITY

**Cultural and Structural Dilemmas
In American Higher Education**

by

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March 1989

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RIHE Working Paper Series No.2

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**Cultural and Structural Dilemmas
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There is something quite remarkable about the ease with which American higher education and American industry have developed such a close symbiotic relationship (a relationship for which the Stanford/Silicon Valley alliance is only one among many examples); that symbiosis is also quite unique in the world, at least in such scope and depth, and has come to represent an institutional arrangement in which many countries in the West (and the East) have developed a great deal of interest. The special nature of this relationship has greatly facilitated the transfer of information, of technologies, of personnel, and even of institutional units, and seems to have been of considerable benefit to both of the parties concerned.

I propose to look a little more closely into the nature of that relationship, and will begin this exercise by a brief review of the thesis that the ease with which higher education and industry in the United States have penetrated each other has a great deal to do with certain structural and cultural properties of the American system of higher education. There are, in other words, characteristics of American higher education which have either greatly facilitated or simply made possible the development of this symbiotic relationship between universities and industry. By implication, of course, the absence of those characteristics should make the development of a similar relationship in other countries much more difficult or even impossible. Let me give you some examples of the kinds of characteristics I am talking about:

(a) The U.S. system of higher education has a tradition of governance in which academic, political, and economic/industrial interests participate and coexist fairly effectively. This is most conspicuously so in the composition

of boards of trustees of private universities, which tend to have a substantial portion of members with corporate identification; it is also true, if to a lesser extent, for the boards of regents of state university systems, to which a significant number of business leaders regularly tend to get appointed as members. This governance structure, together with the corporate or entrepreneurial origin of many of the founders of private universities, has made joint agendas, plans, and ventures between universities and industry a much more natural proposition than it otherwise (or elsewhere) might have been.

(b) Another condition in American higher education has, especially in comparison with, for example, Germany or France, greatly favored university/industry interaction; this is the tradition of recurrent, intermittent, life-long education, which in the U.S. has considerable standing especially in professional education, and has permitted and continues to permit much more easily a pattern of interspersed periods of work and further study. It is obvious how such a pattern would facilitate the kind of frequent and two-way transfer of personnel that rapidly changing technologies require.

(c) I would also argue (speaking again comparatively) that in some of its basic traits, both structural and cultural, the American university system bears a much closer resemblance to the world of industry and business than is true of most other systems of higher education with which I am familiar. I mean this in at least two ways:

(1) There is a much more pronounced element of competitiveness in the American system of education in general, and in higher education, in par-

ticular; this is true for competitiveness both between institutions and within institutions between individuals, and includes competition for admission, awards, promotions, grants, etc.;

(2) The other trait in which the American university corresponds much more closely than its counterparts elsewhere to the world of business is that in U.S. higher education (for better or worse) the dynamics of supply and demand operate much more prominently and pervasively -- as reflected, for example, in the pricing strategies that determine tuition, salaries, institutional overhead rates, etc.

(d) The U.S. system of higher education makes a rather sharp distinction between general academic and professional training, and I am suggesting that this, too, is one of the structural elements that has tended to facilitate a functioning relationship between university and industry. This distinction is both vertical and horizontal, as it were: vertically, as in the existence of what is largely, though not exclusively, a nonvocational first degree (the Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science), which permits upon its completion the active immersion into the labor market without foreclosing or predetermining future choices of graduate/professional training and career; and horizontally, in the formal institutional distinction between professional schools and academic departments, which has facilitated the identification of specific subsets of the industrial world (say, the petroleum industry) with an identifiable subset of the university structure (say, a School of Earth Sciences).

(e) Another element that has obviously played a role in this context has

been the longstanding tradition of external financing of research, and the safeguards that this tradition has generated against the abuse of such funding (e.g., provisions about secret research, consulting rules, conflict of interest arrangements, etc.). This tradition, and these safeguards, have created a situation in the U.S. higher education system in which external research funding is largely devoid of major controversy, and where there is considerable institutional equanimity about it -- very much unlike, for example, the seemingly endless discussion of third-party funding in connection with revising the law on higher education in the Federal Republic of Germany (Bundesministerium 1986, 17).

The most important characteristic of the U.S. system from the point of view of the university/industry interaction, however, is the absolutely critical role of selectivity and differentiation in the American system of higher education. Even many of the factors that have just been mentioned, such as the pervasive climate of competitiveness, and the distinction between general academic and professional training, go back and are closely linked to the structures of selection.

I would argue that it is precisely this elaborate structure of differentiation, hierarchy, selection, tracking, and differential certification that represents the most unique and prominent feature of higher education in the U.S., and that makes it, more than anything else, such a congenial and suitable partner of industry and commerce.

The American system of higher education, in the words of one of its more

prominent analysts, is "a highly refined status hierarchy" (Astin 1985, 4). This hierarchy is reflected in just about every aspect of how institutions of higher education operate and function: from admissions to the market value of degrees, from faculty recruitment to criteria for tenure and promotion, from fundraising to the level of institutional and instructional resources, and from the volume of sponsored research to the visibility of faculty on national and international councils and organizations. The operational principle that both creates and sustains this hierarchy of differentiation is that of selectivity: the selective awarding of opportunities, all the way from admission into the freshman year of college to the awarding of multimillion-dollar research contracts.

From the point of view of industry and business, it is fairly obvious how valuable and functional this elaborate system of differentiation and selection in higher education can be: whether it is in the recruitment of employees and leadership personnel, where the enormously differentiated and calibrated system of certification (an M.B.A. from University A versus one from University B, a degree in electrical engineering from this school or that, etc.) provides a magnificent screening and pre-sorting device, which employers in countries without such devices have to duplicate internally with considerable effort and at great cost; or whether it is in the choice of university partners for consulting, for R&D work, for contract research -- wherever it may be, the many notches in this complex institutional hierarchy that is American higher education furnish a set of trademarks and ready-made labels which effectively serve as legal tender and as an accepted proxy for a host of presumed qualifications, cognitive as well as non-cognitive. What makes this possible is a

system of higher education that is fiercely predicated on the notion and practice of selectivity and, furthermore, a social system that seems to have conferred a great deal of legitimacy upon the prevailing forms and norms of selection.

This rather stark and pervasive element of selectivity in higher education, in other words, is an integral and accepted part of the normative fabric of American society. Its widespread acceptance by public opinion in the U.S. has, in my view, something to do with at least four things:

(a) Its obvious utility for the effective development of human resources for the U.S. economy;

(b) a political culture that is, compared to most other Western industrialized democracies, and a certain egalitarian rhetoric notwithstanding, much less committed to the value of redistributive policies and, therefore, less troubled by the implications of selectivity for an equitable distribution of life chances;

(c) a generally accepted notion that highly selective institutions of higher education do perform a socially useful function, which will ultimately benefit not just its own products, but society at large; and, lastly,

(d) the fact that, in some form or another, and at some level of institutional quality or another, postsecondary higher education is available to almost everybody, and be it in the form of a neighborhood junior college.

Without necessarily challenging these and other premises that have firmly established the legitimacy of a highly selective system of higher education, I do wish to propose a closer look at what this selectivity really is. This is

what the rest of this paper is about.

Even though there are, as I have pointed out, a number of other ways in which the principle of selectivity manifests itself in the American system of higher education, I am going to focus here on the selection process that is involved in admission to undergraduate education. In many ways, that is the most visible and conspicuous instance of the overall phenomenon of selectivity in American higher education; as I will show, selectivity at the point of undergraduate admissions is closely related, however, to other aspects of selectivity as well, notably those concerning faculty and other institutional resources.

My basic point (see Weiler 1987) is that the nature of the selection process in American higher education is such that it tends to reproduce quite faithfully and, in some respects, reinforce the existing distribution of statuses, careers, and fortunes in U.S. society. As part of this overall pattern, there has been and continues to be a rather striking relationship not only between one's social background and the kind of university to which one is admitted, but also between that and both the institutional resources one finds upon entering a university, and the prospects for success in career, recognition, and earnings upon graduating from it. In other words, the selectivity feature of American higher education is intimately tied to the dynamics of maintaining existing patterns of status and social class in American society: being born into a well-to-do family is a powerful predictor of doing well in a well-situated and well-regarded high school and of getting admitted to a prestigious, highly selective college or university, which in turn is a

powerful predictor of both the kinds of human and other resources that that university will have available and of moving on to a successful and well-remunerated career upon graduation.

And if you happen to be born into a family of rather limited means, all of the above tend not to be true, occasional and remarkable exceptions notwithstanding.

Or, to put this same pattern into yet another perspective:

(a) The most highly selective universities recruit their students not only from among the best high school students, but also, and by very much the same token, overwhelmingly from among the children of materially more privileged families;

(b) furthermore, the most highly selective institutions have substantially more resources at their disposal than the less selective institutions; and, finally,

(c) the graduates of the most selective institutions are significantly more successful in terms of career, social recognition, and earnings than graduates of less selective institutions.

There is a wealth of data that support this assessment (CIRP 1983; 1984; Klitgaard 1985; Willingham 1985; Willingham and Breland 1982), and the statistical strength of these relationships is extraordinarily strong. Let me give you a few examples (see also Appendix):

(a) If we only take the two extreme points of selectivity -- the most and the least selective institutions -- and look at the income of their incoming

students' parents: In the case of the most selective institutions, 47% of the students have parents with incomes of over \$50,000, while only 7% come from families with an income of less than \$15,000; this means that, statistically speaking, the child of the richer family is almost seven times more likely than the child of the poorer family to end up in a highly selective, highly prestigious college. In the case of the least selective institutions, the situation is almost exactly reversed: only 7% of the students in those schools come from families who earn more than \$50,000, while the families of 40% of the students make less than \$15,000. The same pattern is true, in even starker contrast, with regard to parents' education. While this pattern is clear enough, it would be even more pronounced were it not for two relatively common features of institutional behavior:

(1) The policy of "need-blind" admissions, which is designed to minimize the role which the ability to pay plays in the choice of higher education; this policy makes financial aid or loans available to students who qualify for admission at a highly selective college, but whose families cannot afford the cost of attending; this policy, I should add, is in increasing jeopardy at a number of institutions because of its substantial and rising cost.

(2) The policy of "affirmative action" as a special effort to recruit students from ethnic minorities.

While both of these policies have moderated the close correlation between social origin and the quality of educational opportunity somewhat, their overall impact has remained marginal. Non-privileged social background and/or ethnic minority status remain formidable obstacles on the way to highly selective colleges and universities, which is all the more consequential as we

consider the level of resources that are at the disposal of these institutions, and the kinds of career patterns that they tend to open up for their graduates.

(b) Again looking at the most and the least selective institutions, the difference in the level of per student expenditure is not at all trivial, but on the order of over 3 to 1. A very similar pattern prevails in faculty salaries (more selective institutions paying substantially higher salaries than less selective institutions) and in the level of support that universities provide for faculty research, where the ratio between the most selective and the least selective institutions is on the rather staggering order 55 to 1 -- reflecting the fact that highly selective institutions very often also tend to be centers of research activity.

(c) On the relationship between the selectivity of one's college or university and one's future life chances, there is, besides a good deal of essentially accurate folklore, a rich body of evidence. Robert Klitgaard, in a very interesting recent book called, "Choosing Elites," which deals with the admissions process at Harvard, has reviewed much of that research and concludes that selectivity of the college attended is closely related not only to social recognition (as measured, for example, by listings in Who's Who), but also, and very tangibly, to earnings (1985, 124, 212). In a recent article in the American Sociological Review, Michael Useem and Jerome Karabel report, from a study of the educational background of senior corporate managers, that graduation from a highly selective college is significantly related both to access to, and the success in, the top management of major U.S. corporations (1986).

The evidence, in brief, provides a very clear pattern: (1) The prevailing selection mechanisms in highly selective institutions of higher education in

the U.S. tend to extend considerable advantages to children from higher social status families--a phenomenon which is compounded by the special consideration given in many admissions offices of universities to the children of alumni and, in the case of some private institutions, the graduates of private high schools. (2) Graduation from a highly selective college serves as a powerful facilitator on the way to both financial and social success and elite status in American society.

For whatever benefits it has, selectivity does also seem to have its social costs in maintaining and reinforcing, as these data have shown, the rather deep cleavages in American society along class lines. Need-blind admissions, affirmative action, and the tremendous expansion of the entire system of higher education over the last 20 to 30 years notwithstanding, the system does pay a high price in equity for its formidable achievements in excellence.

That, however, is only part of the dilemma.

The other part of the dilemma has to do with changes in the "culture" of the American university and, more specifically, with some rather dramatic shifts in student values and aspirations. From looking over time at one of the best sets of data in this field, the annual freshman survey conducted by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program at U.C.L.A. (1983; 1984), a striking pattern emerges:

(a) The percentage of freshmen who consider "financial well-being" as an "essential" or "very important" objective of their college education has increased consistently since the late 1960s, from a percentage of around 40 to

about 70% now.

(b) The objective of "recognition" from others ranks at a slightly lower level, but shows the same rate of increase over time.

(c) At the same time, the percentage of those students committed to "developing a meaningful philosophy of life" as an objective of their education has dropped as markedly over the same time period, from well over 80% to around 45%.

(d) A parallel trend emerges when one looks over time at the choice of students' majors. Over the past 20 years, there has been a dramatic shift away from more strictly "academic" majors to more pre-professional, vocational, and more directly career-oriented subjects. To give just one example: Between 1966 and 1983, the proportion of freshmen planning to major in English dropped by more than 80%, while majors in business almost doubled.

(e) There is a similar pattern in the data on the career plans of college students. The number of those aspiring to a career in business, engineering, or computer programming has almost doubled over the last 15 years. By contrast, the sharpest decline in career intentions has been in what may be called the "human services" professions--teaching, nursing, social work, law enforcement, and the ministry. While some of these shifts undoubtedly reflect rational responses to changing labor market conditions, their magnitude, together with the other data we have, suggest a significant attitude and value change as well. This trend towards more prestigious and more lucrative careers, incidentally, is generally even more pronounced in the more highly selective institutions of higher learning. The human service careers, for example, which ranked already low among the career choices of all the students, ranked even lower among the students in private universities.

Astin describes this prevailing pattern of beliefs among today's college students as "learning is for earning" (1985, 220). To be sure, this little epigram conceals a good deal of the complexity of the issue (as well as the recent emergence of student interest in volunteer work and social service), but it does capture the thrust of the changes that have occurred over the last two decades. Christopher Lasch speaks of a secular move towards "education as a commodity," as part of the "culture of narcissism" in "an age of diminishing expectations" (1978, 151-153 and passim). David Riesman, in describing the impact of "college marketing" on the potential "customers" of higher education has coined the term "student consumerism" and attributes it to "the overwhelming sense of powerlessness and the accompanying cynicism that prevail currently" (1980, 321). And Astin describes the massive move of undergraduate career aspirations in the direction of more lucrative pursuits as "an unprecedented shift in American higher education", but then adds: "To say that today's students are more materialistic and less altruistic is not intended as a criticism of the students themselves. On the contrary, to a large extent, the values of students are simply a reflection of the values of the larger society in which they grew up" (1985, 221). Whatever the sources may be of these values and aspirations, of this rise in "careerism" (Katchadourian and Boli, 1985), it is very much part of the "culture" of American higher education today, a part that can and should not be seen in isolation from the continuing and powerful structures of selectivity.

Let me conclude: The linkage between, on the one hand, the structure and the culture of American higher education and, on the other hand, the stratified

social order of American society persists, if anything, more strongly than ever: Highly selective institutions continue to attract a carefully chosen and already advantaged group of students from what Klitgaard calls the "right tail" of the ability and social status distribution (1985). This group is already predisposed for access to elite positions by virtue of a cumulative set of factors, including prior parental status, academic ability, and the powerful combination of reputation and resources that is characteristic of their colleges or universities. As, at the same time, the culture and the value system of this group of students move in the aggregate towards more career-dominated orientations, they will be ever more determined to fulfill those aspirations by reaping the full benefits of status and income that their initial selection and the credentialing power of their institutions have opened up for them.

It is obvious that the existence, the prominence, and the resources of highly selective institutions of higher education provide a formidable vehicle of elite formation and one whose effectiveness seems to be, if anything, on the increase. Even if one allows for noticeable improvements of reputation, resources, and hence sponsored mobility in the less prestigious ranks of the American system of higher education, the gap between the top and the bottom of the system seems to remain as wide as ever, sustaining a similarly dramatic gap in access to elite positions in the society. The dynamics of social reproduction, in other words, are alive and well, and continue to rely heavily on the help of higher education. The dilemma is real: On the one hand, the system keeps producing, in ever more impressive forms, the intellectual and scholastic preeminence of our most prestigious and resourceful universities. It is this

very system, as I have pointed out at the outset, that has become such an effective partner of industry and business in a strikingly successful symbiosis. But the same system also sustains, by the very same token, the tremendous variations in status, income, opportunities, and quality of life that are such a stark and, at least for some of us, disconcerting hallmark of contemporary U.S. society. Is the one worth the other? Do we pay too dearly in loss of social justice and equity for the eminence of the Harvards, the M.I.T.s, and the Stanfords, and for the spectacular success of their graduates?

Nor is that the only question we need to ask ourselves. I have said at the outset that for a number of different reasons the existence of a highly selective system of higher education was an accepted part of the American political culture, and enjoyed a remarkable degree of legitimacy in American society. However, as the student culture shifts, as it seems to be doing, from a preoccupation with intellectual issues and issues of meaning to a rising preoccupation with career and financial rewards, it could well be that the structures of selectivity at our most prestigious colleges and universities may risk losing an important part of their legitimacy in the eyes of the society at large. For it is at least conceivable that a society like the United States, if it were to express itself in its entirety (and not just through its elites), might well begin to question the justification and the legitimacy of the tremendous social cost of the Harvards and the Stanfords--especially if those institutions were to become increasingly the vehicles through which a large majority of their students orchestrated their personal advancement into positions of extraordinary material comfort and social success.

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Note: An earlier version of this paper was presented at a Symposium on "New Technologies -- New Educational Challenges: Society and the University in Transition" at the Staatsbibliothek, Berlin (West), October 23, 1987

Table 2. Entering Freshmen (1983) and Financial Characteristics of Institutions at Different Selectivity Levels.

Selectivity Level SAT Composite ^a (Entering Freshmen)	Characteristics of 1983 Freshmen					Characteristics of Institutions		
	A or A- Average in High School (%)	Parental Income		Parents with College Degrees		Total Per-Student ^b Educational Expenditures ^c (1981-82)	Average Faculty Salary (1982-83)	Tuition and Fees (1982-83)
		\$50,000 or More (%)	Less Than \$15,000 (%)	Father (%)	Mother (%)			
100 or higher	79.2	47.1	6.8	83.7	72.3	\$11,243	\$34,056	\$6,406
125-1299	75.2	39.1	8.0	73.9	57.3	8,944	32,273	6,153
130-1224	58.6	39.4	7.1	69.8	52.3	9,037	27,915	5,166
1175-1149	39.8	24.8	12.5	56.1	42.0	5,624	29,414	2,673
1000-1074	33.1	22.5	13.2	51.7	34.9	5,095	27,031	2,120
925-999	22.3	17.0	15.7	42.0	27.4	4,183	25,769	1,537
850-924	13.6	10.5	22.3	30.6	20.0	3,316	24,353	1,065
775-849	12.7	10.4	25.7	26.9	18.5	3,474	23,073	546
Below 775	10.0	7.2	40.1	21.1	19.6	3,676	21,979	640
All Institutions	20.7	15.2	16.0	36.8	25.5	4,418	25,350	1,291

^aACT scores have been converted to SAT equivalents (see Astin, Christian, and Henson, 1978).

^bPart-time students are counted as one-third full-time. Graduate and professional students are counted as three undergraduates.

^cIncludes expenditures for instruction, academic support, student services, administration, and physical plant.

Source: Unpublished data, Cooperative Institutional Research Program, Higher Education Research Institute, and National Center for Education Statistics, 1984.

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