

The trend toward “multiversities” is the tendency on the part of each university to expand its capacity for satisfying the widest goals, values and interests. At the foundation of multiversities is the combination of liberal education and vocational education. Other trends, however, contributed to the development of multiversities. Multiversities are in a crisis period because the contributing trends are mutually incompatible; liberal education does not mix well with vocational education.

GERHARD W. DITZ*

The Trend Towards Multiversities: A Case of Incoherent Heterogeneity

My proposition is that the present recession in Higher Education is significantly related to the trend towards “multiversities”. By the latter I mean the assumption that each university should maximize its institutional capacity towards satisfying the widest range of goals, values and interests. Maximal institutional capacity and viability are assumed to be contingent on maximal structural heterogeneity. It seems that multiversities together with industrial conglomerates, department stores, ecumenical churches, political parties and other modern organizations fulfill the old dictum: the future lies with heterogeneity, and that makes for cohesiveness.

Multiversities attract and accommodate faculty and students with diverse backgrounds, aptitudes and interest. Multiversities promote teaching, research and various community services. They socialize their students; help them to adjust to society. They also teach them to change society. By means of grading and scholarships, universities encourage competition and individual achievement. They also promote social leveling through special stipends and tutoring based on needs. They reconcile authoritarian traditions with democratic principles, elitism with egalitarianism, and grass-roots participation with bureaucracy. They mesh liberal (general, basic, cultural) education with vocational (specialized, practical, occupation-related) education.

I have sketched the heterogeneity of multiversities in dichotomous concepts. I analytically assume that these dichotomies are institutionally inter-related. I hypothetically propose that the liberal/vocational polarity constitutes the independent variable in the multiversities. The discussion will focus on that polarity.

At the beginning of the American era liberal education was institutionally apart from vocational training. The former aimed at developing the “whole man” in a classic, humanistic, Christian, but also ambivalently elitist context. The sloganized reference was to “gentleman/scholar”, not to any vocational specialization or occupational competence. The “liberal” emphasis was on life, here and thereafter, not on making-a-living. It viewed

*Gerhard W. Ditz is Professor of Sociology, Eastern Illinois University, Charleston, Illinois, U.S.A.

knowledge as "coming from within" and developing into wisdom, virtue and happiness. The vocational perspective saw knowledge as externally originating information, as acquired mental or manipulative skills and as trained competence. At the apex of our educational development, a pragmatic and hedonistic philosophy combined liberal with vocational perspectives in the multiversity.

In the training of priests and preachers, "vocation", an originally religious concept, seemed least incongruous with "liberal" education. The amalgamation of liberal arts college and seminary was the first step towards the multiversity. What followed were various combinations of liberal education with the training of teachers, physicians, lawyers, farmers, engineers, accountants, managers and many others. Eventually any occupational specialization, aiming at professionalization through post-secondary schooling was wedded to liberal education and rewarded by a university degree. Institutional combinations proceeded from both ends; liberal colleges adopted vocational, occupation-oriented, pre-professional programs. Seminaries, teachers colleges, technical institutes developed liberal education bases. Often a multiversity was organized out of already existing vocational and liberal schools.

I view the vocational-liberal combination as the basis of the multiversity, but there are other contributing trends. Evening programs were added to day-schools, commuting students to residential ones, part-time faculty and students to full-time. The historical distinctions between privately-endowed and publicly-funded schools progressively disappeared. The colleges' historical identifications with gender, denomination, ethnic group, nationality and occupation, faded. Universities became open, egalitarian and democratic. Faculties, heterogeneous by background, professional interest and ideological orientation, came to teach heterogeneous masses of students. Varying institutional emphasis on teaching or research, undergraduates or graduates, pre-professional or professional students became diffused. The "gentleman/scholar" ideal blended first with the protestant ethic, eventually with mass-leisure and hedonism. By processes of diffusion and accretion, each institution enhanced its internal heterogeneity. But in relation to each other, universities became increasingly uniform and homogeneous. The overall result has been an ever-increasing number of parallel, mutually duplicating, competing institutions.

To re-formulate my earlier proposition, the institutional trend towards maximal internal heterogeneity and maximal external homogeneity constitutes the core of our present crisis. We suffer less from institutional over-capacity and more from a dysfunctional institutional product-mix. Ongoing counter-trends seemingly support this proposition. The more vocationally oriented junior colleges do better in enrollment and funding than the older four-years-plus liberal vocationally mixed schools. A new crop of narrowly vocational schools are highly profitable, whereas most mixed schools survive only by public or private subsidies. Many multiversities replace liberal-oriented courses and programs with occupation-related ones. But there is also a new interest in old type liberal, even classic, studies in

colleges which resisted the vocationalizing trend and in new experimental colleges.

What are the reasons for the dysfunctional consequences of liberal/vocational combinations? Vocational education has a narrow time-orientation. Occupational information and techniques appertain to the here-and-now. They are part of material culture, adjusting to economic and technological changes. Liberal education is stable. It transmits variations on eternal values and symbolic themes. Its time-orientation spans ancient wisdom with futuristic utopias. It is speculative and ideological. Vocational education is practical, objective and relevant. Vocational and liberal education have different ecological and pedagogical requirements. Medical schools must be close to hospitals, law schools to courts, agricultural schools to where the farms are, teachers colleges, to where the children go to school. It seems obvious, given the practical basis of vocational education, to provide practicing opportunities for students and teachers. By the same token, part-time teachers and students are usually acceptable in vocational programs. Students' campus-residence and institutionally supervised extra-curricular activities are not viewed as important.

Contemporary notions of "colleges without walls", substitution of work and/or community experiences for the classroom, abolishing requirements of residence, class-attendance, and the supervisory role of the university generally, may constitute implicit recognition that vocational training does not need these things, also that it is for such training that most students go to college. Liberal education always insisted on communal, ecologically isolated organizations, on full-time continuous involvement, extending for a minimum number of years. As the desired educational impact here is character as much as knowledge, primary face-to-face relations with the teacher in intensive group-situations have always been viewed as essential. The teacher's foremost commitment here has been towards his students, not towards his profession or specialization. In terms of organizational, ecological, normative structure, liberal and vocational education have different, possibly contrasting, requirements. The multiversity has thrown the two together in fortuitous combinations. The result is a diffused, volatile system of problematic effectiveness for either liberal or vocational goals.

There is now the question whether the phenomenal increase in higher education is significantly associated with the trend towards multiversities. Vocational training is closely related to physical survival, economic values and technological progress. Liberal education expresses man's ideal, symbolic, spiritual interests. How to make a living has generally been an everyday concern for most people, whereas pursuing ideal interests was traditionally only for the few, or for the multitudes after the workday. Whether the few constituted an elite depended on the emphasis of the particular culture. To the time-honored juxtaposition of gentleman-scholar there has been the old notion of the "poor scholar"; more recently the "student as nigger".

The industrial and protestant revolutions moved the liberal-vocational

polarity into new philosophical and institutional contexts. Philosophical contrasts of spiritual-physical, ideal-material were blunted. Occupational choice and advancement were viewed less as matters of economic survival and more as media for upward mobility, even spiritual salvation. Intellectual pursuits of pure knowledge, values, symbols were taken out of their contemplative, other-worldly contexts. They were secularized, subjected to scientific logic and oriented towards pragmatic, worldly concerns. This was also the time when public mass-education started. The goal first was vocational. The "three R's" were necessary for occupational adjustment to industrial society. But the occupational frame of reference soon softened. Public schools also taught wholesome living, rational thinking, the ethics of the golden rule, the rights and duties of citizenship and even gave some exposure to the fine arts. As the years of required and publicly provided education increased, cultural programs became progressively part of the standard fare. General and vocational courses often became indistinguishable.

Public post-secondary institutions also started with a primarily vocational purpose. Cultural courses were viewed as the super-structure, the icing on the cake. But as new, greatly varying vocational, pre-professional, professional programs were increasingly adopted by the multiversity, liberal, general education courses became the new basic structure. The latter integrated the many specialized vocational courses by giving them a common educational denominator. Inevitably this led to a prolongation of the education process; longer programs, more courses and more years of formal schooling were required for an increasing number of occupational certifications. To what extent the whole process has been inflationary is debatable, but there are inevitable inflationary consequences to the institutional amalgamation of liberal with vocational education. Liberal education has an indeterminate life-span; it starts at birth and lasts a whole life. It has organic connotations like growth, and maturity. What follows are assumptions of minimal and fixed time-periods disregarding the relevance of the program to the student's vocational goal, his variable capacity and motivation.

Liberal education has other inflationary consequences. It has been viewed as education for the "free" meaning those, who due to background or motivation, are not primarily oriented towards occupational careers. Superimposing this liberal connotation on mass-universities is inflationary. It creates passivity and minimizes effort. If education is organic, students and teachers should wait for growth and maturation. This de-emphasizes self-discipline and externally imposed discipline. It postpones and weakens occupational choice. It dilutes responsibility and individuality.

Another connotation of "liberal" is that content and method of education must not be forced into rigid molds as indeed they were not in the old liberal and also in the new experimental colleges. But now the same perspective is applied to large, vocationally structured programs and to students who came with the implicit promise that the degree will assure occupational and socio-economic advancement. Applying this liberal orientation here minimizes

efficiency. The socratic method turns into fun-oriented rapping sessions. The instructor at best is moderator. At worst he is just one of the spontaneity-inducing circle.

Anchored in the tradition of liberal universities is the principle of academic freedom, which always implied both the freedom to teach and to learn. On both counts the principle is incongruous in the vocational context. In its recent development it means that students should be consulted on program, course content, teaching method and standards of student performance. This orientation may produce smoother intra-university relations, more active citizens and happier individuals. But in an occupationally-related program it cannot but reduce teaching and learning efficiency and in that sense again have an inflationary impact.

Since it is different from specialized vocational or professional schools, the multiversity cannot require that students have firm occupational goals and that they have the necessary capabilities. Nor can these institutions adapt the supply of occupationally related programs to the prevailing occupational market. All this would be contrary to their liberal orientation, and it is the latter, not the vocational programs which legitimize the university. Also there is the time-honored and prestige-supported claim that liberal, general education will advance competence in any occupation.

The overall impact of the multiversity, then, is inflationary and this is not just the result of an over-optimistic expansion of university facilities. The concept of multiversity itself has raised both demand and supply of higher education. It aroused diffused and utopian needs which cannot be satisfied. It made institutional promises which themselves are utopian. One pragmatic proof of inflation is the ensuing recession. Indicators of the latter are accumulating. The long existing, linear relationship between degrees and income no longer operates. There are reports of a national net emigration of academic intellectuals. Perhaps even more disturbing is the observation that college graduates conceal their degrees to get employment. Of all recession-indicators the most persuasive is the drop in enrollment which is most visible in non-vocational programs.

If the promises of the multiversity are utopian and the results inflationary, this is further indicated by the emergence of counter-utopian, deflationary thinking. The "de-schooling of society" has become a major slogan and discussion topic. It has also led to unrealistic applications. The solution to educational inflation is not in the indiscriminate reduction of all programs, but their re-structuring; especially to separate, institutional, vocational education from liberal education.

There are other utopian themes which have fed into the multiversity concept. One, at least as old as Marxism, claimed that when all basic production problems had been solved, the non-scarce wealth should be distributed, and new generations should be educated for leisure and recreation. Marx, steeped in ancient history, probably perceived that this would become the ideology of dying capitalism just as free grain and gladiatorial games were the last attempts to bolster the falling Roman establishment,

before the barbarians sacked the eternal city. The multiversity has a strong position in the leisure utopia. Increasingly tax-supported, the multiversity is a natural extension of the welfare state, adding the "circenses" to the "panem". Faculty and students alike subscribe to the gentlemanly way of living. Whereas at the beginning of the American era the Protestant ethic had pre-empted the leisure-class concept of liberal education, the public welfare university now pre-empts the protestant ethic. Manual work, except as a hobby is viewed as demeaning. This generally applies to any form of effort, exertion, discipline, or systematic application. Classroom, library, laboratory, refectory, gymnasium and chapel are intrinsically viewed as places of entertainment. The multiversity is the antipode to the monastic virtues. Hedonism is the new consciousness. To belong to the new elites, faculty and students alike have to excell in the arts of image-building, manipulating, promoting and lobbying. The arts are long, life is a game, the play is the thing, and boredom the worst enemy. Normative promulgations have to identify with, and affirm the tastes of the masses. Liberalism has become permissiveness and borders on nihilism. Though the campus-culture epitomizes the national culture, for most students and faculty university life presents more effortless fun than life on the outside. That is why the multitudes are still coming, but there is a lurking suspicion that this is our Indian Summer.

With the ongoing academic recession, there are institutional adjustments which are often in the right direction. But location, physical and organizational structure, and the new mores are inelastic and change-resistant. Some of the institutional over-capacity may well be used as community adult-educational, cultural, or recreational centers. But even on this score there are problems of inelasticity.

Next to the students, the faculty constitutes, of course, the most important contributing variable. Like the whole institution, the faculty reflects inflation and incongruous combinations of occupational roles. In one role the professor is the descendant of the Oxford and Harvard tutor; the young gentleman's intellectual and moral mentor. Another role goes back to the medieval or Greco-Roman scholar-arbiter of truth, beauty and justice. A more modern role is the establishment-affirming scientist-researcher, modeled on the German professorship of the Bismarckian era. Then there is the radical academic, dissenting romantic or conspiratorial revolutionary. In the sixties, he was the intellectual instigator of the confrontations. Finally there is the occupationally-oriented instructor, teaching the increasing number of specialized vocational and professional courses.

These roles have never been mutually adjusted within the multiversity and they never can be. To be effective the tutor should have relatively few students on an encompassing, continuous, long-term basis. In the multiversity the tutorial function has usually been divided; delegated to counselors, graduate assistants and those professors who find this activity particularly congenial. The role of scholar-arbiter never grew deep roots in American universities. Whatever little has grown is progressively destroyed by the ongoing bureaucratization of the multiversities, under which profes-

social productivity has to be evaluated against other public welfare commitments. Notwithstanding rationalizations to the contrary, teaching and research cannot be effectively harmonized at the mass-undergraduate level. Where harmonization is forcibly induced, quantity invariably replaces quality in both directions. The academic recession has enhanced the dilemma. To support its shaky public image the university needs both publications and popular teachers. The radical academic's fame and fortune have drastically declined since the sixties. If he is not willing and able to recant, or if he does not slip on a different professorial costume, he tends to be an early victim of the recession-induced faculty witchhunts. The occupationally-oriented instructor has always been under cross-pressures between professional and teaching roles. The multiversity has dramatically increased these. It is no longer good enough to instruct competently in accountancy, engineering, nursing, or home-economics; one also has to be a professor!

The role-conflicts of the multiversity professor were a significant factor in the campus upheavals of the sixties. As a very probable empirical proof of my thesis, these upheavals were much stronger in rapidly developing multiversities, weaker in pure liberal and/or vocational schools. The incongruous status of the multiversity professor is a major factor in the present crisis. Needless to say, he is being its principal victim. To add insult to injury, to save his job security, standard of living and individual dignity, the professor, representing Western civilization's oldest profession, will have to learn from the mine-workers and teamsters.

What also hastened the inflation/recession of higher education was the continuous increase of public funding. Historically, tax money went primarily towards vocational education. Liberal education in our society was funded similarly to, or as an extension of church services. Perhaps this is a more plausible reason for the continued reluctance of public authorities to fund liberal education, than the old argument that this would be using tax money for luxuries. Church services were never viewed as luxuries, but the separation of state and church has been consistently supported. However valid this argument, governmental opposition to fund liberal education weakened, when the latter was weaned away from its original religious matrix and mixed with vocational training in the multiversities. The latter increasingly and inevitably have been going public. Let us assume that these institutions in every other respect were alright, can true liberal education really thrive under public sponsorship? Could a Socrates, Jesus, Galileo, or Einstein have taught effectively in a public multiversity? More to the point, will political agencies extracting money from increasingly resistant taxpayers not have to justify what, why and for whom the professor professes, and how this enhances the public good? There already are state master-plans, blue-printing every university and state models for evaluating the professor's performance. There already are supervisory hierarchies, extending from the classroom to the governor's office. There is no reason why this should not be extended to the White House, under any administration.

The university's bureaucratization and politicization need not be destruc-

tive of its vocational programs. Excessive political pressures and bureaucratic interferences can be counter-acted by occupational associations. They share with the political authority a common interest in securing optimal numbers of optimally trained persons. But what common ground is there between political authority and liberal education? It is the latter, however, which holds together the diverse vocational programs of the multiversity. If the liberal framework goes, what remains of the institution? In this direction then, too, the multiversity carries the seeds of her own destruction.

All this may be too dramatic and pessimistic. Historically the multiversity emerged because of the nation's belief in education as the democratic assurance of social progress. Even if those assumptions and beliefs may have somewhat weakened, the pluralistic structure of the multiversity makes its universalistic mission appear most realistic. For what else have we got? At least the multiversity can assure us that, not only are the many called, but they are practically all chosen; at least for admission, and with minimal aptitude and effort for a degree. Even if the multiversity only performs this symbolic service, at least it assuages the nation's sense of guilt for not having yet resolved its many continuing social problems. In the last analysis, this is the only reason that the multiversity is still strongly with us.