RECENT CHANGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION
AND THEIR ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS*

The shift toward universal access to higher education and the view of higher education as a business have resulted in a dramatically more heterogeneous student body (and, to a lesser degree, a more heterogeneous faculty), increased internal and external pressures for accountability, and the idea of students as consumers. These trends call into question whether or not standards of ethical behavior are shared among the faculty members. By the same token, they also call into question whether or not the norms, standards, and behavioral expectations of higher education are shared by today’s students. This situation presents Sociology departments with significant ethical challenges. These include issues related to the development of ethical standards and their communication, as well as the establishment of policies regarding ethical behavior and their enforcement, for faculty members and staff as well as students.

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MOVEMENT FROM
EDUCATION FOR THE FEW
TO EDUCATION FOR THE MANY

The first major shift in the purpose of higher education has to do with the broadening base of the student body. I am, for a moment, going to use the notion of “literacy” (the ability to read and write, and do simple mathematics) to serve as the equivalent of “education.” In that sense, there is little doubt that for most of history, “education” was provided for the elite members of a society rather than all the people. This should not be surprising to any sociologist. Knowledge is power, and what elite wants to give up any of its power, let alone to the masses? After all, if everybody has it, is it power any more?

Actually, there were some practical reasons why education was available only to the elite. In the first place, only they could afford it. Education requires a teacher, and, without government support, who but the elite could afford to pay a teacher? Similarly, gaining an education takes time, and the elite were the only ones with the leisure time to pursue it. The rest of the people spent the bulk of their waking
hours working in order to obtain the basic necessities of life. There are, of course, exceptions to this image, such as Socrates sitting with his students gathered around him in early Greece. However, the notion of education for the elite held for most of 2000 years of human history.

The invention of printing obviously had a major impact on education. Prior to the printing of books (and later, broadsides and pamphlets, then newspapers and magazines, and even the road signs and advertisements of today), there was little opportunity for education. One might argue that there was little need for it. The logic is clear. Why learn to read if the only things you can find to read are kept locked up in a monastery, or are so time-consuming to create that only a few copies can be produced in a lifetime? Similarly, why learn to write if almost no one else can read what you produce?

Of course, in time many people did become literate. But, by and large, the first to do so were the elite and their children. The elite were followed by the middle classes, and after that, some of the poor and “the rest” (immigrants and minorities). Indeed, as the western world became more urban and technologically developed, education for children began to make sense, because they were relatively unproductive in an urban setting. By the turn of the 20th century, child labor laws and compulsory public education solidified this trend.

Such a characterization of education certainly applies to North America as well as to most of Europe. But, the older model of education for the elite still applies today in many parts of the world, for widespread illiteracy remains. While illiteracy is close to zero in the more developed nations, significant proportions of the people are not yet literate in the less developed nations. Furthermore, the situation is worse for females than for males. According to the Population Reference Bureau (1998), in the less developed nations of the world, 78 percent of males over 15 years of age are literate, thus 22 percent are still illiterate. In comparison, nearly 40 percent of females are still illiterate—almost twice as many.

Higher education is no exception to this brief characterization of education for the elite. Nevertheless, the fundamental nature of the institution has also been remarkably stable over time. While, the college and the university probably date back to about the 11th century and the time of Thomas Aquinas, its roots are still evident today (Hecht 2000). I would doubtless be able to walk into one of the really old universities that still exist in Spain or France or Italy and identify a classroom. It is much the same today as it was then—a place for a sage on a stage in front of the students. Only the accessories have changed.

It was only in the last quarter of the 19th century that departmental structure and graduate education were introduced into American colleges and universities at Johns Hopkins (Calhoun 1999). The structure of American colleges and universities was modeled after the structure of the German universities and English colleges that had preceded them for nearly 300 years. In fact, the basic disciplinary divisions we recognize today were put in place as recently as the 1920s.

In addition, and also following their European predecessors, early American departments were set up in a hierarchical fashion, with a tiered set of faculty ranks that increased in prestige and privilege, with the head (or, recently, the chair) at the top. Departments, in turn, were enveloped in a similarly hierarchical structure of colleges and vice-presidents, with a president at the top. Indeed, the very structure of early American higher education was aristocratic in nature, and colleges and universities existed to serve a largely aristocratic student body—America’s elite. While the content of higher education was certainly important, perhaps equally important was the nature of the social structure in which it was provided. In effect, the structure represented the nature of the social structure that graduates would find in the social world—a hierarchical structure with them at the top.

Undoubtedly, higher education in the United States was largely closed to all but the upper and middle classes until well into the 20th century. There were early portents of change such as the foundation of land-grant institutions, with a mandate for extending higher education to broader populations, and the creation of women’s and African-American colleges. However, the end of the second world war and the GI Bill signaled that this phase of American higher education was rapidly coming to a close. The GI bill, in an attempt to prevent crippling unemployment, literally pushed millions of veterans into higher education. That event was a threshold, for it heralded a fundamental shift in the purpose of higher education toward what historian Hecht (2000) called “massification.” This is the shift from higher education for the elite, beyond higher education for the masses.

Today, higher education increasingly serves all of our citizens, not just the middle and upper classes and those few bright and lucky others who are able to perform. For example, community colleges were created as one mechanism for opening opportunities for higher education to previously unserved or underserved populations. For example, in 1964 to 1965, about 500,000 bachelor’s degrees were awarded in the United States, but there were no associate degrees. By 1999 to 2000, however, about 1.2 million bachelor’s degrees were projected in the United States (Digest of Education Statistics 1999),...
along with another 570,000 associate degrees. While the proportion of adults with a college degree is still relatively small (about 25%), it is steadily growing. And, of course, there are powerful political messages reinforcing the trend (e.g., Vice Presidential candidate Cheney’s statement in a speech at the 2000 Republican Convention, “...no child will be left behind”).

**HIGHER EDUCATION AS A BUSINESS**

Following Ritzer’s original lead (1996), Roberts and Donahue (2000) refer to the phenomenon of treating higher education as a business as the McDonaldization of the university. They argue that it has resulted in the de-professionalization of college faculty members and other negative consequences. In their words:

...the bureaucratization and overall rationalization of the academy is evident in the current emphasis on accountability and supervision of faculty, in misunderstanding of assessment and post-tenure review, in administration of merit pay programs, in increases in uses of adjunct faculty to teach basic courses in the curriculum, and in a cost-accounting approach to determining effectiveness. The roots of the problem are grounded in the push for running a university like a business... (p. 365)

Levine (1997) takes a similar position with regard to the consequences, but he argues that American higher education has grown to the point that it has become a mature industry. As a mature industry (in contrast to a growth industry), the government seeks to control higher education, questions its efficiency and effectiveness, demands greater accountability, and attempts to control its cost.

In the last three or four decades of the 20th century, the numbers of vocational and technical schools offering post-secondary education grew significantly. In many instances, community colleges also provided vocational and technical training programs along with the preparatory courses in general education for those students who intended to pursue bachelor’s degrees. This combination serves community colleges well and their enrollments continue to expand.

Colleges and universities have traditionally been the primary sources of professional training in law, medicine, dentistry, and the ministry. However, seeing the substantial numbers of students with vocational interests, they too began to offer programs within their traditional structures that were clearly vocational or technical in nature (occupational therapy or blind rehabilitation). While such efforts have certainly helped to stabilize the economic condition of many colleges and universities, they have also helped to blur the view of higher education, certainly from the perspective of the general public, but perhaps also from the perspective of state legislatures. In addition, business and industry continue to invest massive amounts of money in training for their employees. In fact, the amount of money spent by business and industry on employee training probably exceeds the combined funds spent on higher education by federal, state and local governments. As a result of these factors, a change has occurred in the focus of higher education. Instead of the intrinsic value that had traditionally been associated with a higher education (intellectual pursuit), considerable pressure now exists to focus on the economic outcomes of that education—its extrinsic value.

**RECENT TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

What trends in higher education are associated with these fundamental shifts in purpose? Although a number of trends have been identified in the literature, such as changing pedagogy, faculty employment practices, and the impact of technology, several follow more or less directly from the major shifts: a) diversity, b) the student as consumer, and c) accountability. Moreover, they have some obvious ethical implications for higher education.

**Diversity**

First, there have been dramatic changes in the demographics of the student body. More women, minorities, and older people are completing college degrees today than ever before. In addition to the barriers of sex, race, and age, the barrier of socioeconomic status is also coming down. The change is perhaps most dramatic with respect to sex. Prior to the 1981 to 1982 academic year, more bachelor’s degrees had always been awarded to males than females. In every year since, more degrees have been awarded to females than to males (Digest of Education Statistics 1999). By 1999 to 2000, in fact, more than 55 percent of all bachelor’s degrees were awarded to females, and by the end of this decade, that proportion is expected to be close to 60 percent.

There have also been increases in the numbers of African Americans and Latinos completing college degrees, although these gains are much less dramatic than the growth in the numbers of women. Between 1976 to 1977 and 1996 to 1997, for example, the proportion of bachelor’s degrees awarded to African Americans did grow, but only from 6.5 percent to 8.3 percent; for Latinos, the change was from 2.1 percent to 5.5 percent. In both instances, the amount of growth was important, if not as dramatic.

There is another form of student diversity that has occurred in concert with the demographic—diversity in social, economic, and cultural background...
(Calhoun 1999). Students today seem different from students of two or three decades ago. According to Levine (1997), “they are not as well prepared to enter college as their predecessors” (p. 9). As a department chair, I regularly hear my colleagues complain about students today. Some of the more common complaints are: “They have little writing experience and most do not seem to be able to write well.” “Their math skills are weak.” “They do not know much history or geography.” “They have short attention spans.” “They do not know how to study.” “They do not have good work ethics.” “All they seem to want are courses and majors that will provide them with a job after they graduate.” “Many do not read the required materials at all, let alone the night before an examination. In fact, some of them do not even bother to buy the textbooks.” Dorn (1990) examined discourses about students and found similar results. Whether these perceptions are accurate does not really matter. What does matter is that the faculty members, and many of the students, believe them. As sociologists, we know that makes them real.

Just as the diversity of the student body is changing, faculty characteristics are also changing, although much more slowly. Here, too, more women and minorities are completing advanced degrees. The proportion of women receiving doctorates in all disciplines has been steadily climbing, from 33 percent in 1982 to 1983, to 39 percent in 1995 to 1996. In 1980 to 1981, nearly two-thirds (64.4%) of all doctorates in the social sciences were granted to males (Digest of Educational Statistics 1999). By 1994 to 1995, that proportion had dropped below a majority, to 49.2 percent. Women received 50.8 percent of all doctorates in the social sciences in 1994 to 1995, and that proportion grew to 51.6 percent in 1995 to 1996, and 53.1 percent in 1996 to 1997, the most recent data available (Digest of Educational Statistics 1999). Similarly, the proportions of African Americans and Latinos receiving doctorates in the social sciences are steadily growing. In 1980 to 1981, African Americans and Latinos represented 4.0 percent and 2.3 percent, respectively, of all doctorates in the social sciences. By 1996 to 1997, those proportions had grown to 5.5 and 4.8 percent, respectively.

This is not to suggest, however, that the professoriate is now as diverse as the student body. On the contrary, faculty ranks are still dominated by white males, especially at the top and in administration. In 1995, for example, 65.3 percent of all faculty members were male and 85.1 percent were white. Moreover, 82.2 percent of the full professors were male, along with 68.2 percent of the associate professors, and 56.4 percent of the assistant professors. Only among the instructors and lecturers were there more females than males (Digest of Education Statistics 1999). Thus, while there has been movement, the situation largely remains as it has been—white males responsible for the education of an increasingly female and minority student population.

However, it is likely that there will be much greater demographic diversity among the nation’s faculty members in the near future. Many of the college and university faculty members of today were trained in the 1960s and early 70s. This means that many of them will soon be eligible to retire, especially those at the state universities and community colleges, since that is where much of the baby boom met higher education (Magner 2000). Nearly a third of the nation’s full-time faculty members are 55 or older. Within the next decade, a very large proportion of them could retire, and given projected student enrollments, are likely to be replaced by new, more diverse doctorates that are being produced now. Such a pattern does indeed suggest that there will be a growing diversity among faculty members.

The massification of higher education, therefore, has resulted in a student body that is dramatically more diverse than it has ever been. Moreover, that diversity is not only in regard to social and demographic characteristics. In addition to educational preparation, it also implies a much wider range of social, cultural, and economic backgrounds than was heretofore the case.

**The Student as Consumer**

Treating higher education as a business or an industry has consequences for faculty members and students, because it alters the fundamental nature of the students’ relationship to higher education. Traditionally, students were viewed as active participants in the process of higher education who were dependent upon the faculty members for information and experience, but still engaged in the process of learning. The notion of the student as consumer, however, tends to shift much of the responsibility for learning from the student to the teacher. This, of course, also feeds the trend toward greater accountability and external control.

In addition, increasing numbers of students are participating in higher education while they are simultaneously engaged in other significant life activities (Levine 1997; Green and Dorn 1999). This includes many first-generation college students and, of course, includes non-traditional students who have recently enrolled in higher education in record numbers. These are students who are not only going to school but, at the same time, are working (at least part-time) and having families. According to the Digest of Education Statistics (1999), almost 40 percent of all college students were over 25 years of age in 1993, more than 60 percent were working, and over 40 percent were attending on a part-time
basis. These numbers are quite different from years past, when most students went to college straight out of high school and attended until they finished, four years later. Today, less than 20 percent of undergraduates are “traditional students”—18 to 22 years old, attending full-time, and living on campus.

These new students must manage major competing demands for their time. To them, higher education is only one of the things they are doing, and maybe not the most important one. In comparison to the students who attended colleges and universities in the 60s and 70s under in loco parentis, today’s students face a dramatically more complex set of priorities.

Accountability
Just as the composition of the student population has changed as a result of the massification of higher education, the pressure for accountability springs directly from the view of higher education as a business. In the past, higher education was essentially accountable only to itself. After all, since colleges and universities were preparing elites for their positions in society, who was to challenge them? Today, however, as the population base of higher education has spread, the demand for accountability has moved from largely internal sources to largely external sources. This is especially clear among state institutions, where significant proportions of a state’s funds must be committed to higher education as enrollments continue to grow and spread across all sectors of the population.

Students themselves are also beginning to question the utility or effectiveness of some of the classes they are required to take. In part, this derives from their adherence to the economic value associated with a college education. In part, however, it may also be due to an essential lack in clarity of purpose within higher education. Institutions are not broadcasting a single message regarding their purpose. Many are trying to become all things to all students, a singularly difficult and costly task. Indeed, while mixed messages tend to result in confusion for the students, they can also result in students’ adherence to the message of extrinsic value. It is, after all, constantly reinforced in the media.

ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIOLOGY
All by itself, the new diversity within the student body has a number of ethical implications for Sociology departments. First, departments must recognize that today’s students are not like yesterday’s students. The students of today are far less homogeneous than the students of 20 or 30 years ago, when the senior faculty members were students themselves. Many of today’s students have not been exposed to the traditional norms and expectations of higher education regarding standards of performance, individual responsibility, plagiarism, cheating, fairness, and respect for others. Given this diversity, faculty members must be made aware of the possibility that some students are simply not cognizant of the standards of behavior that faculty members routinely apply in their classrooms. Therefore, faculty members must not take for granted that students share, or even understand, their own norms and expectations. More importantly, faculty members must not routinely apply their personal ethical standards without taking into account the student’s situation and his or her cultural background.

Second, and in the same vein, students need to be made aware of the applicable ethical standards of behavior. For example, in the absence of information to the contrary, it is difficult to accuse someone of plagiarism if he or she has been previously “taught” that copying material directly from sources is “good research.” It is particularly important that such standards of behavior be universally communicated and evenly applied to all students. However, since there is far from universal agreement among faculty members with respect to the norms and expectations that are appropriate, students are likely to be confused, especially in ambiguous situations. Departments would be well advised to hold open and frank discussions about ethical standards and come to consensus on how those are to be presented to students.

Third, the subject matter of sociology courses, and perhaps the sociological approach itself, is often controversial, and may present other ethical problems relating to respect for others. In part because of the wide diversity of student backgrounds, faculty members must be alert to the possibility (indeed, the high probability) that controversial topics are likely to receive a wide diversity of responses. Handling such responses in a sensitive and responsible manner is pedagogically necessary and ethically important. Moreover, it can be especially critical in a politically correct atmosphere, where students are likely to feel uncomfortable presenting minority or unpopular opinions (Levine 1997). Many sociology faculty are likely to need training so they can prevent conflict or resolve it when it occurs.

Fourth, faculty who see themselves as professionals, by definition, are likely to be interested in assessing their own performance in the classroom, since it is there that they have such potential impact on their students. Assessment, after all, is about self-improvement and quality control, and those imply an openness to change (Green and Dorn 1999; Roberts and Donahue 2000). However, it is equally clear that faculty must willingly participate in the process of assessment and have full access to the information produced. At the same time, they
must be assured a measure of confidentiality. Otherwise, the most likely consequence is alienation of the faculty and lack of trust in the process. Departments can take the lead in assessment by designing it from a developmental perspective. In this way, the rights and the expectations of both faculty and students can be protected.

Fifth, because more students are attending college while working and raising families, departments must find ways of offering legitimate educational experiences that do not ignore students’ life circumstances, but rather take them into account. Some programs have realized that their students are functioning under such multiple cross pressures, and offer such strategies as collaborative learning, experiential approaches, and service learning (sometimes called community-based education) as ways of mediating those cross pressures. Departments would be well advised to expand such opportunities.

Sixth, because of the popularity of some programs that are often associated with sociology (including both criminal justice and social work, but more recently, applied), many departments will need to make a concerted effort to clarify their own missions. This applies at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. At the very least, this will require substantial efforts to socialize students about the discipline of sociology, its place in the college or university, and how it is connected to the job market after graduation. It may even involve creating separate mission statements regarding the programs embedded within a sociology department, especially if some, but not all, of the programs have clear occupational outlooks.

Seventh, departments must also take a leadership role in establishing, communicating, and reinforcing norms and behavioral expectations for faculty and staff, as well as for students. Plagiarism, cheating, and other forms of inappropriate behavior cannot be tolerated among students, and need to be dealt with consistently and openly. By the same token, insensitive, inappropriate, and unethical behaviors among faculty and staff also need to be dealt with, both firmly and publicly. This certainly includes interactions with students, but also interactions with one another. Too many people feel that faculty, like doctors, police and others, “protect their own.” Indeed, they may think that academic freedom is nothing more than a way of allowing faculty the license to do whatever they wish, both in and out of the classroom, no matter how outrageous it may be. Such a perception is dangerous to higher education, for it perverts the fundamental professionalism of us all.

Finally, while the American Sociological Association has a code of ethics for its members, it appears to be largely directed at professional behavior in general and is less relevant for the sociologist’s role in the classroom or the department. However, our colleagues in Canada, from the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (Murray et al. 1996) have produced a set of carefully constructed ethical principles aimed directly at college and university teaching. Among others, topics include content and pedagogical competence, sensitive topics, relationships with students, confidentiality, and respect for colleagues. Sociology departments would be well advised to use these two codes as a foundation for discussing their own ethical standards and developing consensus about ethical behaviors that they will support and enforce.

REFERENCES


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