

GERMAN AND AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION IN COMPARISON: IS THE AMERICAN SYSTEM RELEVANT FOR GERMANY?

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ABSTRACT

This paper serves as an introduction to a conference devoted to a comparison of higher education in Germany and the United States and how the two systems cope with contemporary pressures and seek to take advantage of opportunities. Using the example of the University of California, it raises questions concerning how a higher education institution copes with growth while assuring, to the extent feasible, a number of desired outcomes related to student attainments, scholarship and research, and reasonable efficiency and cost among others.

We are about to embark on a conference devoted to a comparison of higher education in Germany and the United States and how the two systems cope with contemporary pressures and seek to take advantage of opportunities.

My job as keynote speaker is surely not to provide answers to the issues that we will address. Rather, it is to set the stage by observations and questions that others will address in detail.

This not the first conference devoted to this topic. Prior conferences have been enlightening and papers emanating from them instructive. I am especially grateful to the reports from the conference – “German and American Universities: Mutual Influences in Past and Present” – held in May 1991 at the City University of New York. Papers by Claudius Gellert and Henry Wasser have been most helpful for me.

This will not be the last conference either. Societal demands and the dynamic evolution of systems of higher education change frames of reference and require further analysis and discussion.

It is useful at the outset to define the particular subjects we will be engaging. They represent interrelated problems of the moment. There are many, as indicated in the program:

Governance; Costs and Funding; Differentiation; Teaching and Research; Status of Faculty (Tenure and Irregulars); Liberal Arts and Career Preparation (Measuring Outcomes and Defining Missions); Diversity of Participants; Quality, Nature, and Funding of Research.

Most of these issues are grounded in the enlargement of access and the concomitant huge increase in student numbers in the last forty years or so. The reasons for growth are numerous. The major ones are related to demography political change, and the demands of our economies. Student numbers might not rise as rapidly in the future, but they surely will not diminish.

The questions we face are how to cope with this growth while assuring, to the extent feasible, a number of outcomes. Among these are:

- Meaningful educational experiences for students with differing attainments and aspirations;
- Fulfilling and energizing careers for faculty;
- An inclusionary predisposition both to afford equality of opportunity and, eventually, to minimize discord;
- Excellent intellectual product in scholarship and research;
- Reasonable efficiency in accomplishing the goals; and
- A sensible and acceptable distribution of costs.

We in Germany and America deal with similar problems, but in different cultural milieu. Many of us have done work in comparative fields – in social sciences, humanities, and the professions. Mine, in a university context, has been mainly in law, urban planning, and conservation. I have found that comparative studies can provide exceedingly interesting insights. But I have never found that broad solutions are transferable from one culture to another. Therefore, I caution that the prospect of wholesale adoption of any particular system of organization or means towards desirable ends is illusory. For instance, later in this presentation I will talk about the tripartite systems of public higher education in California. Many insights can be learned from understanding these systems. I cannot imagine it would be profitable, however, to contemplate installation of these systems wholesale in places other than where they evolved.

Having issued this warning, it is nevertheless useful to see how today's organization of higher education in Germany and the United States has intertwined roots. Looking at origins from the American perspective much is owed to both Germany and England.

From England came the conception of a close relationship between teachers and students concerning defined subject matter and a preoccupation with developing a cultured, educated, and worthy graduate. From Germany came a different conception, less focused on imparting a body of knowledge by faculty to student, but based rather on the idea of a functional unity between teaching and research, with learning occurring as a by-product of collaborative research which produced new knowledge in the quest for both theory and objective truth. Thus subject, rather than the personal development of the student, received primary attention.

The structure of American universities reflects these two roots. From England comes the undergraduate curriculum with its liberal arts core and from Germany the basic methodology of graduate education in the arts and sciences with less emphasis on courses and primary reliance on both individual and collaborative research. An American contribution is the introduction of the professional school into the university mix. An interesting by-product of this has been the pervasive influence of the preoccupations and methodologies of university education in arts and sciences on the curricula of professional schools.

Most universities and colleges in the United States until the mid-19th Century featured curriculum classical in nature with little emphasis on sciences or technology. Most were private, with ultimate governance the responsibility of privately chosen boards of trustees, and most of the institutions were religious in origin, although many had become secular in nature.

Against this background, a relatively unique American contribution of the 19th Century was the creation of land grant public institutions of higher education, which offered much

broader access to students than the private counterparts, especially at the undergraduate level, a research-oriented graduate education on the German model in the humanities and social and natural sciences, and much broader curriculum covering practical arts (engineering, for instance) as well as more conventional subjects.

As so often happens in the United States, the land grant universities joined the panoply available; they did not substitute for existing institutions, but the new philosophy had fundamental impacts on higher education in general.

I indicated at the outset that the huge enlargement of access to higher education is the central factor with which systems of higher education in Germany and the United States must cope.

The United States, while not without problems, has done relatively well. In a few moments, I will discuss briefly how structured diversification has developed in the United States.

Germany, according to a number of commentators, has had greater difficulty: There has been diversification of the German system of higher education by rapid expansion of an already existing post-secondary non-university sector (analogous to British poly-technics) and the upgrading of institutions from secondary to the post secondary level. Moreover, new universities have been set up. Nevertheless, there are problems. I quote in this regard from Gellert's article previously referenced [The Impact of United States Higher Education on German Higher Education Reform and Innovation Debates, in German and American Universities, Teichleer and Wasser (eds) (1991) p.50].

"In Germany ... the expansion of the university system after World War II has led to an awkward structural and functional muddle. The transformation of the system into places of mass higher education with about four times more students now than in the early sixties, has jeopardized the traditional balance between the tasks of academic inquiry and advanced training of students. The old ideal of a unity of research and teaching is still part of the official value frame of reference at universities. But in recent decades frictions occurred in this system because of an increasing discrepancy between the traditional research orientation of university teachers and their actual involvement in professional or even vocational training of large numbers. Thus, despite several decades of reform discussions, this model is still characterized by antagonistic structural features: on the one hand, the students' ability to choose freely subject, universities, and their time of examination; on the other, the professors' freedom to teach whatever they like (both sanctioned by the Humboldtian principle of the freedom of teaching and learning). Other significant aspects have been the constitutionally guaranteed open access to all universities for anybody with a secondary degree; the bureaucratic and state control of all curricular and organizational matters, including the civil service status of the professorate; the overloading of programs and courses according to individual research interests of the professors; and finally, the widely criticized length of studies in most subject areas."

I cannot attest to the accuracy of these observations, but if they were accurate in 1992 and largely persist today, I better understand the purposes of this conference.

Let me turn finally in somewhat greater detail to the American experience. I will use California as an example for many reasons:

- (1) Familiarity – I taught and administered at UC Berkeley for 35 years.
- (2) A huge state, normally on the forefront of change. A place of diversity – leading the country in this regard. The population in 1995 was over 31.5 million. Estimated population in 2010 is a third more. On the verge of minority majority with an extensive Latino population, a growing Asian-American component and African-Americans at a steady 10 percent. Nevertheless, by referendum, the use of race as a criterion for public benefits was banned and benefits for immigrants (especially illegals) were curtailed.
- (3) A very large student population in higher education. Fall enrollment in 1997 was over 1.8 million. 85 percent were in public institutions. Minority enrollment was

- likewise hefty consisting of 47.9 percent in 1995. In 1993-4, California institutions awarded 121,000 bachelor degrees, 38,700 masters, and over 5000 doctorates.
- (4) A well-articulated system of public higher education with access guaranteed to all high school graduates to two-year community colleges, but with largely merit-based admission to state colleges and to the University of California. In addition, a vigorous private sector, with both research universities (principally Stanford and the University of Southern California) and liberal arts colleges, both secular and religious. Public institutions, however, as indicated, predominate. There are 108 community colleges, 28 state colleges, and 9 (to be 10) University of California campuses.

My impressionistic sense is that this system does relatively well in assuring positive outcomes in relation to the criteria I posited at the outset of this talk. I look forward to Daniel Fallon's presentation in Session II which will be largely devoted to differentiation.

- The diversification of institutions fairly well provides meaningful educational experiences for a wide range of student with differing attainments and aspirations. And it is a second chance system. Thus, those who perform well in community college have opportunities to transfer to both higher systems after graduation.
- Regular faculty seem well treated with ample opportunity at the state of college level, and especially at the University, to do meaningful research. Problems exist, however, for non-regular faculty of the sort I am sure James Perley will discuss.
- Inclusionary efforts are, on the one hand, made more difficult by segmentation. On the other hand, all are assured a place somewhere with upward transfer possible. The referendum rejecting affirmative action, however, has a decidedly negative impact, especially at the most sought-after campuses of the University. Tendencies towards de facto degradation by campus is maximized. Session V will be devoted to problems of these sorts.
- Concentrating much of the serious research effort at university campuses assures excellent intellectual product. Teaching loads are not substantial impediments, especially in the physical and natural sciences. New patterns of funding of research raise some serious problems which probably will be addressed in Session VI. Segmentation, in most ways, helps efficient outcomes.
- Much heavier reliance on tuition than previously true impacts access and raises serious equity problems that are somewhat ameliorated by student aid. Session IV will undoubtedly address many of these problems.

Finally, I turn to more generally-perceived problems in American higher education which might resonate in discussions during this conference. I was privileged to serve on a Commission of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges in 1996, which concluded that serious governance problems affect many institutions of higher education in the United States, especially in the public sector. The report called for a strengthened role for academic presidents. The conclusion has been hotly debated, especially in faculty circles, but there is greater agreement concerning the nature of the problems sought to be addressed.

I will address three clusters of problems: diminishing resources, impacts of information technology, and access and diversity of student body and faculty. I leave governance to the next two speakers. Before I do this, let me stress again the enormous variation of educational institutions in the United States: public and private; military and civilian; church run, church affiliated, and staunchly non-religious; technical institutes; liberal arts colleges; two-year community colleges; small and comprehensive universities; corporation run training and education programs. I stress this because the problems being faced by higher education in general have variable impacts depending upon type of institution.

First, diminishing resources. The United States economy is now very robust with surpluses occurring in federal and state coffers and large aggregations of capital in the hands of a large number (although a small percentage) of Americans. It was not long ago, however, that public-sector resources were less, and public spending for higher education waned, establishing new patterns which will likely persist with public expenditures in the educational sector focussed on K-12.

This means: (1) that public resources for general support for higher education will not be copious (including student financial aid so important to the private sector), and (2) the higher levels of tuition that have occurred in the last decade in the public sector, and longer in the private, will persist.

High tuition has galvanized public scrutiny resulting in questioning, for instance, of:

- (1) Personal practices, most notably tenure, and the use of graduate students and adjunct faculty to teach undergraduate courses;
- (2) The relevancy of liberal arts curricula to career aspirations;
- (3) Enrollment limits on core courses in large universities, extending time to degree;
- (4) And the “failure” to incorporate efficiencies of the business world – for instance, downsizing – by the more extensive use of information technology.

Higher education is seeking to respond to the clearer resource picture (and the criticism that has ensued), but the responses raise other problems. For instance, private fund raising efforts have intensified, but concomitantly so has the proportion of time devoted to these efforts by administrators and faculty, thus lessening attention to the teaching and research programs. Additionally, corporate support is playing a larger role, especially in research, which raises dangers to free flow of information and to the nature of research being undertaken. Another example is the increasing use of irregular faculty (not on tenure tracts, being paid less and teaching more, unrewarded for research, often without fringe benefits) in order to reduce costs and maintain greater flexibility to respond to accelerating change.

Second, information technology: the higher education sector (other than scientific research) is embracing information technology more slowly than many other sectors, but incorporation is inevitable. There are obvious applications in management information and administration, and they are being used, as are means of individual communication like E-mail. Less rapid, however, is inclusion in various ways in courses, although such use is accelerating as younger faculty become proportionally more numerous and student expectations increase. The use of information technology techniques to substitute for more conventional forms instruction, however, seems to be moving quite slowly.

On the horizon, however, is a whole new means for delivering instruction. Concepts like virtual university, distance learning, and the like, are becoming current. The impacts of these developments are uncertain. But their prospects are troubling for residentially oriented undergraduate experiences and collaborative forms of graduate education. They clearly provide significant potential, in any event, for post-university education.

Finally let me turn very briefly to access and the diversity of student bodies and faculty. America, in my view, is at a fascinating point in history, as its population becomes less reflective of Caucasians of European origin. This change is leading, as we should expect, to others (minorities in the current vocabulary) occupying higher proportions of the collective student body than heretofore. But the distribution among institutions is far from even with minorities disproportionately located in the less prestigious part of the higher education spectrum. Race-sensitive criteria, as part of affirmative action, were helping to address this disproportionality, but its rejection is a backward step, in my view, to producing an integrated leadership in the near future in important sectors like government and business.

I trust that this keynote presentation has raised issues and questions adequate to frame the substantive presentations and discussion to follow.