An essay on higher education essay sample

Education, Curriculum

This paper explores trends in higher education in terms of Max Weber's theory of rationalization. It is Weber's contention that there are four basic motivators for human behavior. People are motivated by custom or tradition, by emotions, by religious or ethical values, and by rational goal oriented behavior (which Weber calls " zweckrational"). All human behavior, Weber claims, is motivated by various combinations of these four basic factors.

Weber's thesis is that bureaucracies increasingly centralize and broaden their scope in advanced industrial societies. Bureaucracies are human organizations specifically designed for the efficient achievement of short-term rational goals. As societies become more bureaucratic, Weber states, goal oriented rational behavior becomes dominant in guiding our actions–at the expense of traditions, emotions, and values. It becomes a habit of thought, a way of interpreting our world. This trend is called the " rationalization" process.

The final factor that should be understood in Weber's theory of rationalization is the phenomenon of the " irrationality factor." Just because an action is rational in terms of fulfillment of a short-term goal, Weber asserts, does not mean it is rational in terms of the whole society. It often happens, he writes, that an excessive focus on short-term goals undermines the very goals of both the society and the bureaucracies themselves.

In the past, higher education was seldom as bureaucratically organized as corporate and government institutions. This was mainly due to European traditions and the fact that universities are very dependent upon a large number of highly educated professionals who used their numbers and

expertise to demand a voice in university governance. This, however, is beginning to change.

Internal Efficiency

There are several rationalizing trends at American universities that can be considered to be home grown–internal to the university, mirroring the more goal oriented norms of measurement, coordination, and efficiency that increasingly dominate society as a whole. They arise internally to meet the needs of higher education institutions themselves–the need to increase productivity and efficiency because of tightening budgets. Universities can no longer expect significant increases in state funding and therefore further rationalize their organization by controlling instructional costs, tightening coordination, cutting programs with few majors, and raising tuition and fees. This list would include:

The tightening of coordination as evidenced by the rise of continuous evaluation of faculty through measures of student performance, student opinion surveys, and monitoring professor performance in the classroom. These reviews are conducted for purposes of merit, promotion and tenure. This change in monitoring is part of the increase in educational bureaucracy, and part no doubt is due to the general tightening of coordination and control exhibited throughout society in order to assure continuing productivity of the workforce. We no longer assume that professionals will perform unless monitored. Most recently the tenure process has come under

increasing review. One proposal calls for a “ post-tenure” review process– other proposals are to scrap the tenure process itself.

The standardization of course content. Some of this was accomplished through the widespread use of textbooks, but the move to standardize the curriculum comes from many modern sources–accrediting boards, state agencies, federal mandates as well as universities themselves. Most of this standardization is undertaken to promote quality and comparability across universities–apparently faculty are no longer qualified to decide on their own course content, students can no longer survive a “ bad” professor, and ease of transferring credit between institutions has become a major goal of the university;

The growth in the power and influence of central administration. An increasing share of resources that go toward administrative costs demonstrates this. As the sheer size of faculty, student body, and physical plant of the university grows, the division of labor at the university increases, so to do the mechanism of coordination and control enlarge and centralize. It is also evidenced by the frequent end runs around university governing boards (faculty governance organizations and academic curriculum committees) in order to more efficiently achieve the goals of the institution itself. A university can be far more efficient without debate, discussion or the need to compromise.

The rise of professional educators in administration–instead of the more traditional administrators who came through the ranks in a variety of

disciplines. Riesman (1980) indicates that most college and university presidents came invariably from the ranks and had a Ph. D. degree– doctorates of Education, he reports, were extremely rare (p. 1). Today almost 22 percent of college presidents hold the Ed. D. as their highest degree, fully 42 percent of all university presidents come from the field of education (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 1998, p. 30). It seems that holding a specialized degree in educational administration (or some related field) is rapidly becoming the credential needed for higher academic administration.

The increased use of adjunct professors (contingency workers who are even more exploited than the ones in corporate America) and graduate students (who are even more exploited than adjuncts) to teach undergraduate courses (Barkume, 1998). The percent of faculty who are part time has increased from 30 percent in 1975 to 41 percent in 1995 (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 1998, p. 29). This of course increases the bottom line.

Increasing class sizes (Barkume 1998). While I could only find passing reference to this phenomena, it is consistent with my own teaching experience and the personal experiences of my colleagues at other universities. By increasing class size, of course, the faculty become more productive in terms of generating credit hours. They also tend to rely more on multiple-choice tests and other bureaucratic instruments to manage these larger classes.

The use of technology to extend the reach of professors through the Internet, computer classrooms and labs. This refers to the growing use of “ alternative delivery systems” (a term I picked up in Australia–we are not alone). Plans in Kentucky call for the establishment of the “ Commonwealth Virtual University (CVU)” in which courses are taught entirely through alternative delivery systems. Courses will be conducted through public television, the web, videotape, the use of closed circuit TV classrooms to wire the campus class to other sites in the region, or simply through the mail.

These cost-cutting trends—-adjuncts and temporary faculty, web technology, and larger classes–increase the rationalization of education and tend to limit the professional wage component, (and the power of that component) and increase the “ profitability” of the university.

Market Efficiency

Universities have recently proliferated in size and scope. It is readily apparent to anyone who has worked in higher education over the last 30 years that things are rapidly changing. There are a number of trends in American university education that are caused by broader social and cultural rationalization–by attempts on the part of universities to more efficiently meet the needs of advanced industrial-bureaucratic society. The list begins:

An increasing focus on numbers of students–the health of a university (as the health of a corporation) is increasingly measured by growth or, at the very least, maintaining market share. David Riesman (1980), a sociologist and

advocate of educational reform through his work with the Carnegie Foundation, identifies the “ student as consumer” as a primary cause of recent changes in American higher education. In response to the baby boom, both public and private American universities and colleges expanded and overbuilt during the 1960s and 70s. These same institutions are now desperate for warm bodies. Riesman attempts to look at the consequences of this competition for body counts–finding that it has impact in far ranging areas of the university as well as the society as a whole. One indicator of this vigorous recruitment of students is the growth in the percentage of high school graduates (age 18 to 24 years old) that attend college. This number has gone from 34. 3 percent in 1986 to 43. 5 percent in 1996 (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 1998, p. 19). Though because the pool of 18 to 24 yer olds is declining, colleges must widen their net.

Individuals and institutions increasingly focus on higher education almost exclusively as a means of occupational training for the individual (and nothing more). In doing this college students are responding to some real market conditions. Mark Mittelhauser (1998) writes of the occupational reality that recent and future graduates will have to face. “ This labor market dilemma for college graduates is not new. In fact, it has existed for more than a decade and is expected to continue. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), there were about 250, 000 more college graduates entering the labor force each year between 1986 and 1996 than there were new college-level jobs. This number represents about 1 in 5 of the college-educated entrants to the workforce” (p. 3).

People increasingly go to college, Mittelhauser reports, because the labor market favors college graduates–they earn more, suffer lower unemployment than those with a high school diploma (2. 4 percent unemployment for college graduates in 1996, less than half the 5. 7 percent unemployment rate for high school graduates in the same year). In addition, major occupations that require college-level applicants are growing faster than jobs in the economy as a whole. Part of this is due to the changing nature of the economy. Part of it is also due to educational upgrading of many existing jobs (often simple " credentialization," not a significant change in responsibilities or pay).

The bulk of the jobs available for the college graduate are " professional specialty occupations" (such jobs as engineer, registered nurse, lawyer, teacher, and social worker)–the largest and fastest growing of college level jobs. The second largest category is " executive, administrative and managerial occupations." Together these two broad groups account for over two-thirds of college level employment in the United States (Mittelhauser, 1998). People increasingly go to college for the credentials to get these jobs.

The fact that many are flocking to college for credentials needed for the job market is evidenced by surveys of incoming freshmen in the fall of 1997. Reasons noted as very important in deciding to go to college: 74. 5 percent indicated " To be able to get a better job" (the highest of any single category). The second highest percentage–74. 3 percent–indicated " To learn more about things that interest me,"–which is not consistent with the career orientation (as Weber pointed out, human behavior is motivated by a mix of

motivations). But the third most widely given reason was, “ To make more money” (73 percent), which fits the career orientation pattern perfectly (Chronicle of Higher Education, 1998, p. 22).

This personal vocational focus is supplemented and encouraged by a political system that constantly promotes higher education as a means of economic development; an economic system that demands that higher education subsidize their training costs; and a campus system that increasingly follows these corporate and government priorities. Colleges and universities are rapidly becoming worker-training centers for the bureaucratic-industrial state–selecting, sorting, and training future workers for industrial-bureaucratic society. This vocational focus and the attempt to maintain or increase student numbers in a declining pool of applicants causes the following:

One of the most obvious consequences of marketing to students is the proliferation of professional and semi-professional degrees. This is accompanied by the precipitous decline of the liberal arts as a viable major, particularly in the fields of philosophy, English and the social studies–the bulk of the traditional disciplines that used to define university education itself. (The natural sciences, being far more amenable to career and practical application, have not suffered from these same declines.) Majors in college do not just teach a list of skills and general factual knowledge. More importantly they socialize students into the values, ideologies, and interests of the discipline (this is true of any discipline, though I would argue that the

liberal arts tend to instill broader values and ideologies than do professional fields).

For too many students, the liberal arts and humanities that they may be exposed to in their core courses are nonessential, to be tolerated (to varying degrees) and subordinate to their occupational major. When professors in the humanities and social studies critique society they are often teaching to students who already have a vested interest in the status quo, junior doctors, business people, social workers. This makes students much less playful, less willing to experiment with new ideas–it also goes a long way toward explaining why undergraduates no longer have a unique subculture.

The proliferation in the number and power of professional and occupational accrediting boards–these organizations often dictate both courses and course content to the faculty. This trend is a mix of standardization to both insure minimum quality and " relevance" of the educational program for student consumers, and self-interest on the part of occupational groups to restrict access and enhance the employment within the profession as well as within academe itself;

The move to increase the clientele of the university by marketing to " nontraditional" students (age 25+). Many older students need to " retool" for the ever-changing economy. This particular marketing strategy is part of the greater career focus of the university as a whole. The age of students enrolled in college has climbed markedly in recent years. Today, over 42

percent of all college students are 25 years or older (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 1998, p. 18).

The attempt to increase the number of foreign students through programs on campus that bring students from their home countries to the US campus, or in locating satellite campuses overseas. Again, this is an attempt to expand the number of students in the institution. Many have written of universities overselling in foreign markets to the detriment of the students themselves (Riesman, 1980: pp. 218-224).

The increase of resources devoted to responding to federal and state " requests" for data to insure " accountability." This, Riesman suggests, is often done in the name of consumer protection. (If left to their own devices, apparently, colleges and universities would all become degree mills–selling credentials to those that could afford them.)

The increase of resources devoted to marketing the university to students in order to maintain student numbers or to grow in numbers. And the costs of student marketing are rising. Riesman (1980) points out that the escalation of marketing strategy was based on the irrational belief that other institutions would not follow the same strategies to increase their enrollment–thus canceling out any temporary gains in the number of students–though rendering the recruitment process far more expensive. Riesman then gives a classic example of the irrationality factor. " Each director of admissions thinks his or her stratagem is unique, failing to realize that a hundred others, no less hungry and intelligent, will think of the

identical devices” (p. 113). The high-stakes costs of recruiting students has to be borne by students–either in the form of increased tuition, larger class size, inadequate library or computer support, or ignoring maintenance of university facilities (Riesman, 1980).

All of these changes (and others) can be directly related to increasing industrialization, a consequent increase in the division of labor, and the growing function of colleges and universities in training that labor. But there is still a little more, there is the “ irrationality factor,” the effect of all of these changes on the educational “ product” and the society itself.

The Irrationality Factor

In campus offices and in the hallways of professional meetings (where most of the real discussion takes place) professors will complain about students. We complain of students who are not conversant with their culture; students who are often overtly hostile toward the arts, humanities, and the social studies; students who are indifferent toward politics and the governance of their society; students who’s only interest (and value) seems to be pursuing a comfortable career. Some of this talk, no doubt, is a look back (with heavy doses of nostalgia) to the days when we were undergraduates–when we were going through the “ most exciting time of our lives.” But by marketing to student wants, in the form of watered down core requirements and an emphasis on vocational education, institutions do not always give students what they need:

The general decline in standards at many universities. Evidence of this decline comes out in report after report. A Department of Education study in 1993 indicated that over half of American college graduates could not read a bus schedule. “ Exactly 56. 3 percent were unable to figure out how much change they should get after putting down $3 to pay for a 60-cent bowl of soup and a $1. 95 sandwich” (Leo, 1997; p. 14). Manno (1995) reports that “ We’re ‘ dumbing down’ the curriculum and descending into ever lower levels of remediation. A 1992 analysis of college transcripts of recent bachelor’s degree recipients showed that slightly over 26 percent of the recipients had not earned undergraduate credit in history and almost 31 percent had not studied mathematics of any kind” (Manno, 1995: p. 48).

Remedial courses are offered in 91 percent of our public colleges, and in 58 percent of our private colleges. Some 23 percent of colleges award degree credit for remedial courses. Almost all colleges allow remedial students to take college-level credit at the same time (Manno, 1995). Manno goes on to ask: “ Can it be true that large numbers of students unable to do serious college-level work in reading, writing, and mathematics are able to do serious college-level work in history or business?” (Manno, 1995: p. 48). Open admissions, Manno claims, sends the wrong message to high schools and their students. No admission standards in college lead to no exit standards in the high schools.

Both Riesman (1980) and Manno (1995) relate the decline in standards to university-student market relationships. With institutions competing ‘ frantically’ with each other for students “…faculty members and

administrators will hesitate to make demands on students in the form of rigorous academic requirements for fear of losing ‘ FTE’s–full-time equivalent students” (Riesman, 1980: p. xiv). The erosion of the core curriculum–the number and quality of courses often designated as “ general education” or “ distribution requirements” that are aimed at educating the whole person–evidences this same decline in standards and rigor. Riesman (1980) again relates the decline of the core to the student market–“ since any requirement is likely to turn away prospects” (p. 108).

Another factor behind the decline of general standards and of the core is the “ disintegration” (in Durkheim’s sense) of broadly subscribed cultural norms, values and ideologies. There has been an increase in specialization at universities. This has led to multiple disciplines and “ special” interests in campus debates about university standards. Finally there have been a number of academic movements–postmodernism in particular–which are hostile to the entire humanistic and scientific tradition of the West. Postmodernism emphasizes such themes as subjectivism and relativism; it rejects notions of objectivity, truth, and the validity of the scientific enterprise–all, they claim, is rooted in the observer himself, in his class, race, and resulting ideology (Harris, 1995). Consequently, it is now very difficult to get professors to agree about what should constitute a common core, difficult to get them to agree what forms of ignorance are unacceptable–what every student must know.

But there is another side of the issue of declining standards. A full answer to the question “ why?” should discuss the types of workers “ needed” by

industrial-bureaucratic societies. That those on top of these bureaucratic hierarchies are in need of a broad-based traditional liberal arts curriculum could easily be argued. In an advanced industrial society that need may be as high as 15 to 20 percent–a figure that our best private and public colleges can supply. But it is difficult to make the same argument for the millions of technical specialists, semi-professionals and middle managers that the private and public universities annually produce. If we assume that most of these are destined to serve in the middle levels of bureaucracy, or, at best, as professionals dependent upon both public and private bureaucracies, it could be argued that the old liberal arts disciplines are counter to these bureaucratic needs.

Critical thinking (which I would define in terms of Weber's concept of wertrational –the ability to exercise rationality within a holistic context) is not in high demand in such positions. To have a middle level manager competent in critical thinking (as opposed to problem solving in their specialty), one that is constantly asking " why?" or " should we?" instead of executing the decisions from on high would impede the efficient operation of the bureaucracy itself. Of course, while technical expertise is very rational in terms of efficient bureaucratic structure, such narrowing of education is counter to both the traditional view of an educated person and to the needs of a democratic society (as well as, ultimately, counter to the needs of the bureaucracy itself).

What is to be Done?

In the critical analysis of social institutions the “ what is to be done?” question always comes up. It seems to me that there are a few things that true believers in the values of the Liberal Arts (humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and the fine arts) can do. The list below represents only a beginning:

* Organize. We can no longer assume that the interests of the university coincide with the interests of the liberal arts. We must do our best to organize our interests within the university–active representation on curriculum committees, faculty senate organizations, and unions. Our values and interests must have active representation in all university governance structures. The liberal arts are too often fractured–both within and between colleges. It is only through organization that the liberal arts can have a clear voice in the university.

* Accreditate. Universities respond to accreditation agencies. The traditonal liberal arts disciplines, perhaps through their respective professional organizations, should develop accreditation standards for undergraduate general education programs as well as specific accreditation standards for the individual liberal arts disciplines.

* Unite. We are fractured now, there is little systematic effort at promoting the values of the liberal arts. The widespread adoption of a general liberal arts program of study could serve as an alternative to the rampant specialization in our culture. This need not replace traditional liberal arts

majors but could serve as a focal point for advertising and marketing the writing and analytical skills we develop in our students to the wider society.

* Teach. We should put real focus (and reward) on undergraduate teaching, as well as scholarship and service that bring the values, perspectives, and methods of our disciplines to a broader audience.

We live in a society dominated by organization. Without organization, we are rapidly being structured out of the university and the broader society. This is to the detriment of a free democratic society; detrimental to the culture itself. We must act.

References:

Barkume, Megan, 1998, ‘ College and university faculty,’ in The Occupational Outlook Handbook, US Department of Labor, Retrieved October 12, 1998, (http://stats. bls. gov/oco/ocos066. htm#outlook).

The Chronicle of Higher Education, 1998-1999 Almanac Issue, vol. XLV, no. 1, August 28.

Harris, Marvin, 1995, ‘ Anthropology and postmodernism,’ in Science, Materialism, and the Study of Culture, Murphy, Martin F., and Maxine Margolis (eds.), University Press of Florida, Gainsville.

Leo, John, 1997, ‘ The answer is 45 cents,’ U. S. News & World Report, vol. 122, no. 15, April 21, p. 14.

Manno, Bruno V., 1995, ‘ Remedial education: replacing the double standard with real standards,’ Change, vol. 27, no. 3, pp. 47-49.

Mittelhauser, Mark, 1998 , ‘ The outlook for college graduates, 1996-2006: prepare yourself,’ in Occupational Outlook Quarterly, Summer, vol. 42, no. 2, p. 3 (7).

Riesman, David, 1980, On Higher Education, Josey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco.