SYSTEMS THEORY, GENERATION THEORY, AND THE UNIVERSITY: SOME PREDICTIONS

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ABSTRACT

In order to have vigorous and adaptive academic disciplines it is imperative that there be a continual inflow of new generations of academicians into the university. It is noted that current socio-economic conditions in North America are such that young academicians are not entering the university. The predicted long-term undesirable effects of the above situation are arrived at by considering it in the light of both systems theory and generation theory. In considering the university as a system, it is argued that there must be a greater coordination between the university's goals and purposes and the needs of society if the university system is to regain critical inputs (students, staff, and funds) so necessary to maintain its functioning. Karl Mannheim's theory of generations and social change is applied to that predicted situation where there is no new generation of academicians flowing into the university system. Finally, it is recommended that the basic tenets underlying the discipline of the sociology of knowledge be transformed into normative statements, thereby providing the rationale for greater interaction between society and its institutions of higher learning.

The university in North America is currently in the midst of a transitional period. While the previous decade has been one characterized by unprecedented growth, it seems that the university is presently in a situation where at best its growth has stabilized. As argued below, universities, like individuals, are dynamic living systems that undergo change in the context of changing social conditions. In order that such systems be able to survive, they must be responsive and adaptive to changes in their external circumstances or environment.

The purpose of the present article is to make some disquieting predictions concerning the extent to which the university will be able adequately to carry out its two traditional functions in the immediate future, that is, the

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1 The author suspects that the present analysis and predictions will apply to universities outside North America to the extent that they have experienced a parallel socio-economic history as described in the next section.
imparting and advancement of knowledge (teaching and research respectively). To the extent that planners and policy-makers wish to avoid the realization of the predictions made here, some suggestions are made subsequently that may serve as a basis for initiating appropriate counter measures. The argument begins with a brief consideration of some of the recent changes in socio-economic conditions that directly affect the university. The university will then be characterized in terms of systems theory. The formal properties of systems theory, coupled with an awareness of the current socio-economic conditions, provide the conceptual framework for considering specifically the role of incoming generations of students and professors in carrying out the main functions of the university. Of particular importance in the latter analysis is Karl Mannheim’s theory of generations (1952).

The Social Conditions

As is well known by now, the phenomenal growth of North American Universities during the sixties was spurred on by a belief that the university could significantly contribute to the development of society by providing the necessary technology and knowledge that could be used in meeting the challenges of many current social and national problems. For example, governments heavily supported the pure and applied sciences during the post-Sputnik era in order to remain competitive in the area of space exploration, and the U.S.A. was thereby able to meet President Kennedy’s goal of putting a man on the moon before 1970. Similarly, great faith was placed in the social sciences for providing answers in such problem areas as mental health, race relations, urban planning, labor-management relations, poverty, etc. As a result of the tremendous financial support given to the university, most departments expanded in terms of both staff and facilities. The post-war “baby boom” twenty years earlier was now providing the required number of new students to permit university expansion to flourish. The positively accelerated growth in the numbers of new university students at this time served as an impetus, vehicle, and justification for a parallel growth of various university departments. An expanding war economy in the U.S.A. provided the necessary financial means to pump moneys into academia and served to maintain the exponential growth of the university. This entire social phenomenon epitomized the North American belief that “bigger is better”.

2 For an argument that basic research is best carried out by independent research institutes rather than universities, see Cattell (1973).