AN AGENDA FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

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The agenda for higher education in the United States today is overflowing with current problems: with cutbacks in student aid, with reductions in funds for research except as related to national defense, with the consequences of financial stringency in many states, with the adjustments to the great demographic depression that is just beginning. Seldom, if ever, have so many urgent problems with such potentially negative impacts confronted our colleges and universities. But there is a longer term agenda, much less certain in its content and almost certainly less disastrous in its implications, that also lies ahead. It is asking a great deal that higher education should raise the level of its sights as it stumbles along today’s rocky path. However, the spirit with which the problems of today are approached and the solutions sought for them can and should be affected by a more long term view.

This longer term view is the subject of Howard Bowen’s new book: The State of the Nation and the Agenda for Higher Education. This book should be a high priority for all persons concerned with the future of American higher education. Today, yesterday, and tomorrow, the actual agenda of higher education has been, is now and will be mostly concentrated on the problems of survival in a time of troubles. But this time of troubles will not last forever, and the current troubles of future periods will be of a different nature. It is helpful, even and perhaps particularly at a time such as this, to look beyond present troubles at the possible worlds of the future for American higher education as they may be and as we wish they might be. This is what Howard Bowen invites us to do. With this book he continues his important series on the benefits of higher education (Bowen, 1977), on the costs of higher education (Bowen, 1980), and now (with benefits and costs both in mind) on the prospective futures of higher education. This book is the best current discussion of the longer run future of American higher education. While I shall disagree, in part, with what Howard Bowen sets forth, this, in no way, detracts from the great admiration I have for the thrust and the general content of his study. I comment upon his views at some length because they are eminently worth commenting upon. He
asks the right questions and gives most thoughtful answers. He encourages a debate that can be quite productive about the longer run future of higher education and on the role of higher education in affecting its own future and that of the nation.

Let me say, at the start of this commentary, that I agree with Bowen's optimism about the medium-run future of American higher education, although I am less sanguine than he is about short-term prospects for the next decade or decade and one-half, specifically in the area of enrollment prospects [1]. I am a firm believer in the contemporary validity of Plato's law that: "when the wheel [of education] has once been set in motion the speed is always increasing." This law has not been true at many times in history and in many places around the world, but it is certainly true, in general, in the modern world. The modern world has needed, and as far as one can see ahead, will need the higher skills and better ideas that higher education generates.

Higher education, as Boyer and Hechinger have recently noted, has, nevertheless, suffered a "loss of confidence" because it is "no longer at the vital center of the nation's work." "For the first time in nearly half a century, America's colleges and universities are not collectively caught up in some urgent national endeavor" — to win a war, to educate veterans, to advance American interests in the cold war, to implement programs of social justice. "Higher education appears to be adrift" (Boyer and Hechinger, 1981, p. 3) [2]. It no longer has the same sense it once did of "positive dedication to the service of an evolving dynamic, democratic community," of serving so actively "the basic needs of American life" (Brubacher and Rudy, 1968, p. 394). This leads, quite naturally, not only to much malaise but also to a search for new goals, a new sense of purpose, new inspirations.

Bowen takes as his premise that higher education will continue with what it does now — with the education of students, with the conduct of research, with the preservation and interpretation of the cultural heritage, with the patronage of the arts, with policy analysis, with its many forms of public service; doing each of these better. With this I totally agree. I would particularly emphasize that we can still make great gains in our contributions to the achievement of greater social justice.

The first major item suggested by Bowen for the new agenda is to help create a "nation of educated people." The potential advances to be made here are enormous. I am particularly persuaded that higher education can make a great contribution to the ability of people to cope with an ever more complex society and to advance the quality of their participation in political and community life. I am less persuaded than Bowen, however, about the potential additional contributions it can make to economic gains in productivity. They may still be substantial but not so central as in the past. I do not agree, as some now suggest, that higher education has become economically counterproductive because overeducated people are dissatisfied with the jobs they hold and sabotage, or, at least, withhold output. I think that the declines in the growth in productivity can be explained by other causes. However, higher education may have already made its peak contributions to enhanced productivity; but not to individual and to community life.

To accomplish this goal of a nearly entire nation of educated people, Bowen counts on increased participation rates in college attendance and suggests that the national rate