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Jeff Aper
Blackburn College, jeff.aper@blackburn.edu

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Blackburn College

ABSTRACT

Questions abound about the quality and purpose of American higher education in the early 21st century. Solutions have tended to be framed in terms of economic production and manufacturing quality control models, and these terms increasingly characterize state and federal systems of authority over colleges and universities. As Habermas theorized, system logic, left to its own devices, will ultimately overpower, or "colonize," the day to day meaning making culture or "lifeworld" of the campus. This colonization runs at counter purposes to the essential foundation of meaning for authentic education. A solution is proposed, suggesting that a deeper base to higher learning lies in embracing the traditional values of the academy and cultivating the faculty as a uniquely rich resource in support of student learning and the dual work of preservation and innovation in addressing the most pressing needs of humanity.

INTRODUCTION

As Steve Culver has documented elsewhere in this issue, higher education in the United States has been subject to escalating scrutiny on matters of cost and quality over the past three decades (see also Aper, 1993; Glenn, 2010). At the same time public and private investments in higher education came to total hundreds of billions of dollars annually. As a contemporary example, the Obama administration's fiscal year 2011 budget proposal calls for almost $200 billion in direct support for programs related to higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2010) and the 50 states add billions more annually in subsidy of higher education within their boundaries. At the same time the average cost of attendance at public four year institutions has risen almost 70% since 1990, while the average cost of attendance at private institutions has risen 50%. This stands in contrast to the less than 20% increase in average family income over the same period (*Chronicle of Higher Education, 2010*).

This massive investment has been coupled with the rise of critical questions about the relationship between attainment, or the formal acquisition of educa-

tional credentials, and achievement, or the actual knowledge and skill that has demonstrably been gained. Stories abounded of college graduates who could not read, write, think, or work effectively with others. Empirical research on knowledge and skills, the popular press, and political pundits have agreed for some time that many graduates did not seem to have essential knowledge and skills that were expected to have been achieved by those who had attained a baccalaureate degree (e.g. – Miller & Milandra, 2005; Romano, 2005).

Yet, while there is a broad sense that undergraduates are perhaps not coming out of their college experience as a uniform high quality product, there is less agreement on what they should be gaining from their educational experiences and how to somehow verify the quality of these outcomes. Many authors have attempted to articulate the purpose of undergraduate education, and certainly every institution has a statement of mission and sometimes elaborate explanations of the intended outcomes for graduates (e.g. - Hirsch, Kett, & Trefil, 1987; National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2003; Schneider, 2010). While there is substantive documentation of the important non-cognitive outcomes of higher education, most quality control concerns center on cognitive knowledge and skill. This focus is almost certainly too narrow, though it lends itself to greater clarity in defining intended outcomes in ways amendable to modern methods of standardized measurement.

Indeed, it is this disconnection between production and personal values that lies at the crux of the difficulties attending efforts to imbue higher education with modern conceptions of quality assurance. There would seem to be little argument in asserting that those concerned about undergraduate education care about cognitive outcomes like facts and specialized skills, and certainly economic competence (as a functional, efficient producer and consumer of goods and services). But they also care about habits of mind (e.g. – reflective thinking, intellectual curiosity, the capacity for ongoing and informal learning), the cultivation of virtue and values (e.g. - thoughtfulness, honesty, cooperativeness, respect for others), and the capacity to contribute to civil society (e.g. - commitment to the common good, respect for law, and active citizenship) (see Sergiovanni, 2000, Fullinwider, 1999, Goleman, 2000, Levine, 2006, and Chickering, 1999). Even as Barton (2008) commented on the consistent data indicating lack of clear workforce needs for a college degree, he observed that "higher education makes very important non-financial contributions to individual and societal enrichment" (see also Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Bowen, 1977, 1997).

As Klemp (1977) and Sheckley, et al. (1992), among others, have reported, the kind of cognitive knowledge highly valued as evidence of educational outcomes (e.g. - Hirsch, et al, 1987) is not clearly related to success in life and work. Research conducted over more than four decades shows that multiple non-cognitive traits and educational outcomes are strongly related to professional and personal success beyond college (Chickering, 1999; Goleman, 2000; Levin, 1998; Levine, 2006; Hart Research Associates, 2006, 2008, 2009) Even cursory review

of the totality of educational systems makes clear that uniform quantifiable data tell only part of the story of student achievement, are half measures for understanding good teaching, have apparently little to do with the quality of life beyond school or the health of the economy, and have uncertain direct relationship to the full development of human potential in colleges and universities.

EXPECTATIONS: EDUCATION AND QUALITY

In the twenty-first century U.S. it is almost universally agreed among government and business leaders and the general public that education should be focused on production of able workers and citizens and support the competitiveness of local, regional, and national economies. This is regarded as realistic and natural. Yet, achieving the deeper virtues and functions suggested above may not be achievable by the logic, methods, or domination of large scale systems, because system imperatives and attendant managerial strategies are then imposed on colleges and universities rather than being shaped by the students, teachers, coaches, counselors, and others who create the reality of day to day life on college and university campuses. Systems can demand data on cognitive outcomes, but founder in demanding standardized data on outcomes related to meaning and interpersonal commitment and community.

Still, testing best suited for determination of cognitive achievement has been presented and championed as a way of measuring and assuring quality in education at all levels. Testing is presented as the only rational way of addressing issues of outcomes and quality in education, which is part of the issue that needs further scrutiny. Tests are tools, and like any other tools, they have limits as to their use and application. In the current environment, "objective" testing carries normative authority and serves as both symbol and signal – a symbol of rational management of educational resources, and a signal that system rationality will be applied to the concerns and questions about the purposes and outcomes of education (Barnetson & Cutright, 2000; Polster & Newson, 1998). Testing is a conceptual technology that carries the power of rational planning and objective knowledge into the intersubjective experience and knowledge of students, faculty, and staff. The "objective" data provided by testing are presented as the only way to serve purposes of equity and fairness in both process and outcome. These methods rest heavily on the credibility of science as an ideology in asserting that uniform measures can be developed and applied to provide direct evidence of student learning, teaching effectiveness, and institutional quality (Habermas, 1989; Phelps, 1999; Stone, 1999). Testing and related conceptual technologies thereby become the objective, scientific, and meritocratic policy levers by which the state can seek to maneuver the processes and manage the outcomes of higher education. The American faith in technology is a deeply rooted one that extends back generations (Cutright & Griffith, 1997; Frail, 2010), which further supports the extension of testing as a technological solution to a compelling problem. Test-

ing allows individually complex cases of personal learning and development to be subsumed into statistical abstractions. When individual subjective experience is melded into an objective mass, technocratic expertise becomes the legitimate means through which to bring order out of the apparent chaos of individual cases (Rips, 2001). Habermas (1989) called this narrowing of the type of information that is acceptable evidence a kind of "structural violence," which is "exercised by way of systemic restrictions on communication; distortion is anchored in the formal conditions of communicative action in such a way that the interrelation of the objective, social, and subjective world gets prejudged for participants in a typical fashion" (p. 219).

It follows from such logic, then, that education is part of the universe of mechanistic processes that can be improved by obtaining, analyzing and responding to data as part of a cybernetic feedback process (Weiner, 1990). Mass testing caters to a desire for efficient, rational-technical solutions to concerns about student achievement, and so it is not surprising that modern accountability efforts are largely based on the premise that we have, in fact, defined consistent, uniform, internationally comparable measures of the facts and skills we can regard as a kind of "gold standard" of educational outcomes. In spite of substantial evolution in both theory and technology over the past thirty years (e.g. – Reckase, 2009), it is not at all clear that the technologies of standardized testing and measurement have grown sufficiently sophisticated to grant ready insight into the quality of learning communities or complex outcomes. Yet the search for this technological fix will proceed apace because the ideology that drives it lacks self-awareness and regards such activity as obvious and "realistic."

A clear example of this mindset can be seen in the work of Miller and Malandra (2005), writing on behalf of the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, who call for a "consumer-oriented, nationwide system for comparative performance purposes, using standard formats, designed for two primary audiences: students (and parents) and policy makers." Benjamin and Klein (2007) also assert that such standardized and comparable measurement is essential. It is not unreasonable to argue that colleges and universities should be held to account for the educational outcomes essential to the public weal and supported by vast amounts of both public and private dollars. But as noted above, institutions properly aspire to cultivate in their students higher levels of thoughtfulness, caring and civility that are rooted both in cognitive skills and non-cognitive skills, values, and commitments. Educators know that education is not a value-free, objective, scientific process. Improvement in the outcomes of education relies on art as much as science. Though it frustrates the system logic of production, education is at its heart a value-driven, ethically rich set of experiences. As Palmer (1998) observed "good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher" (p. 10). Similarly, Braskamp (1999), who spent a career studying the quality of college teaching and student learning, agreed that at the root of the experience a critical and irreducible

element in the quality of teaching is indeed bound up in these same qualities of individual instructors.

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The tension between large bureaucratic systems and the world of individual experience and sense-making is not new. Famed social scientist Max Weber long ago distinguished between what he called substantive and formal rationality (Ritzer & Goodman, 2004). Substantive rationality was understood to refer to the ways in which individuals assessed personal commitments, priorities, and goals and considered the appropriate balance between such concerns as religious and economic values. It required attention to personal meaning and sense-making. Formal rationality was understood to be the logic of systems – governments or economies, for example. Later, philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1989) would expand these perspectives to posit the contrast of system versus lifeworld. The lifeworld Habermas describes is linked profoundly to the human need for context and meaning. As psychiatrist and philosopher Viktor Frankl famously articulated, human beings have a deep need for meaning as a way of navigating the demands of life in the modern age (Frankl, 1993; Lakeland, 1993; Wong & Fry, 1998). In contemporary America economic activity has become the central discourse and purpose of our culture, and meaning has become a more difficult conversation, especially when we talk about the meaning and quality of higher education in a system that is rooted in a cultural framework shaped by faith in the power of market forces to define valued "products" (Giroux, 1999).

Habermas (1989) argued that modern society can be seen as a complex of "lifeworlds," "systems," and "steering media." "Lifeworlds" are understood as the communicatively formed networks of interpersonal life experiences and beliefs that shape individual identity and guide attitudes, behavior and action as well as provide content, meaning, and character to community and culture (Kemmis, 2000; Myers & Young, 1997). "Systems" describe the components of social interaction that operate according to instrumental, functional reasoning in pursuit of the achievement of specified goals and outcomes. Systems tend to be highly rationalized and associated with "social organization ... mission, vision, strategy, policies" (Kemmis, 2000, pp. 4-5). "Steering media" are the various means, such as money, data, or political power, which allow the rationalized system to exercise direction and ultimately even control of lifeworlds (Götz, 1997). When intense emphasis is placed on limited measures of student learning at the expense of the intersubjective lifeworlds of faculty, staff, and students, serious distortion and disconnection of the system and lifeworld occur. This disconnection results in what Habermas called "colonization" of the lifeworld by the system - a situation in which the functional rationality of the system imposes itself on the intersubjective, interpersonal world of shared meaning characteristic of the lifeworld. As Kemmis (2000) described this disconnection in the context of Australian education,

> We experience ourselves as caught up in abstract, generalized, and globalized system processes, and there seems to be little alternative to adapting ourselves to them. Despite the fact of our endlessly being involved in the lifeworld processes of cultural reproduction and transformation, social integration and individuation-socialization at the local level, the conditions of late modernity - and the colonization of lifeworlds by systems imperatives - push us toward under-valuing what is local, interpersonal, value-laden, moral, or authentically-expressive. (p. 6)

Habermas claimed that early in the development of human social structure system and lifeworld were all but indistinguishable. Increasingly complex human interaction and institutions have resulted in differentiation and ultimately in disconnection of system and lifeworld, a circumstance in which "rational economic and administration action become independent of moral-political foundations" (Habermas, 1989, p. 189). He held that "the normal and preferred logic of societal development is for the societal steering media to steer the societal systems in ways which reflect lifeworld demands" (Myers and Young, 1997, p. 226), but also observed that it was quite possible, even likely, that the system may engage the various steering media at its command to direct social systems in ways inconsistent with lifeworld priorities. Habermas suggests that essential communication with other human beings, communication that rests on assumptions of comprehensibility, sincerity, truth seeking, the dignity of other speakers and hearers, a willingness to listen… is essential to human liberation and growth, and yet is progressively threatened by the colonization of lifeworlds by the system (Lakeland, 1993). As Lakeland notes, communication that is not so grounded is systematically distorted and comes to be characterized by "the pathologies of personal, communal, and political life" (p. 491), exemplified by advertising and the distorted messages of political factions vying for power.

In our system of higher education, the federal and state governments have taken on the functions of the rational, instrumentalist system, increasing the tension with the legitimating interpersonal communication, experience, and authority that characterize the lifeworlds of the campus. Increasing system level control has met direct resistance primarily from the faculty and their authority as a community of experts – an authority deeply rooted in the history and traditions of colleges and universities. The legitimacy of the demands and actions of the system is compromised when they are seen to lack congruence with the authenticity of the norms and meaning of the lifeworld (Kemmis, 2000).

So there's the fundamental rub – we reasonably need both the priorities of the system and those of the lifeworld. The tension is apparent in such comments as those of Spring (1998), in reference to the work of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, who observes ironically that "OECD experts want knowledge to be measured according to its contribution to economic growth. In contrast, Confucius and Plato were interested in determining the ability of indi-

viduals to create moral and just societies" (p. 168). Responsiveness to government, society, and markets is not simply a matter of being driven before the steering media of money and formal system authority (a la resource dependency theory – e.g. Gumport & Sporn, 1999; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). In fact, the notion of higher education in service to the people is a core value of long standing in American higher education. The Wisconsin Idea, articulated by University of Wisconsin President Charles Van Hise in 1904, emphasized the idea that education should influence and improve people's lives beyond the university classroom (Brubacher & Rudy, 1999). Across the span of the 20th century, John Dewey (1916) and Derek Bok (1986), among many others, have also argued that universities have a powerful role to play in addressing the most pressing social, economic, environmental, and political problems of contemporary society.

FINDING BALANCE IN MEANING

Somewhere, as suggested by Van Hise, Dewey, Bok, and even Benjamin and Klein (2007) there is a balance in this, but where does it lie? We need communities of meaning; lifeworlds in which learning is placed in context and students are engaged in ways that bring them to greater potential to participate as active and empowered citizens in an honest democracy, and not the passive recipients of job training and information reception followed by endless rounds of advertising, political sloganeering, and propaganda. As Habermas explained, meaningful discourse requires that those involved in communication be able to assume that their counterparts are genuine, seeking some agreement on truth, and share mutual respect. In a market-driven culture much of the communication of the system is one sided, manipulative, and intended to direct the receiver to a predetermined conclusion. Connell, et al (1982), in a study of Australian education, perhaps hit this most clearly:

> In a society disfigured by class exploitation, sexual and racial oppression, and in chronic danger of war and environmental destruction, the only education worth the name is one that forms people capable of taking part in their own liberation. The business of the school is not propaganda; it is equipping people with the knowledge and skills and concepts relevant to remaking a dangerous and disordered world. In the most basic sense, the process of education and the process of liberation are the same. (p. 208)

Higher education must be more than a vending machine, that ubiquitous epitome of the modern economy - simple, reliable, and consistent in delivery what is requested for what is paid. If there is a true crisis in education in the U.S. today it is a crisis of meaning. Frankl's assessment of the human condition is as true now as it was 60 years ago, and mechanistic approaches to controlling educational outputs will not bring us closer to wisdom or justice. There does need to

be attention to quality in higher education, and it is true that there are currently institutions that are not providing students with the opportunity and experience to grow in knowledge, understanding, reflective capacity, ethical commitment, and the ability to participate fully in a democratic society. We can perhaps think more deeply about addressing such concerns by paying attention to the values that have undergirded serious learning for centuries.

Higher education has an ancient lineage compared to most modern organizations. For example, the University of Al-Karaouine in Morocco was founded in 859 C.E.; the University of Bologna in Italy has operated continuously since 1088 C.E. It seems unlikely that universities have persisted over so many centuries because they changed rapidly or were swept along by new trends in administrative theory or management science. These are institutions that have been very conservative and have held fast to the traditions and values at their core. Yet, such traditional values as deliberation and collegiality are today labeled impractical because they make institutions slow to change and unable to respond adequately or quickly enough to satisfy critics or those who judge organizations based on modern corporate models. The profound devotion to the search for truth, for wisdom, for pilgrimage as a way to a greater and deeper self have been shunted aside as quaint relics of history with no place or purpose in a modern, market-driven economy. Such concerns are treated as secondary at best and more typically impractical and inefficient as we drive down the path of human service to economic ends. The rise of online education that is more akin to the plug-the-cable-in-the-head learning portrayed in the film The Matrix than to traditional commitments to learning in community as the foundation of wisdom amply illustrates the degradation of the faith in education as a path to personal growth and liberation. Education is a market transaction in which students purchase a commodity expected to pay a handsome pecuniary dividend.

THE PAST AND FUTURE FACULTY: SYSTEM AND LIFEWORLD NEXUS

The terrible blind spot in the social efficiency philosophy is the belief that the faculty is a resource to be managed, harnessed under the yoke of the prevailing political, economic, and social values and norms. To commit the faculty to the realization of our most immediate desires blunts or even eliminates the possibilities for the faculty to achieve its greatest potential - to see beyond the next earnings report, political crisis, or environmental dilemma, to imagine a world of possibility and begin to set a foundation for that possibility. Perhaps paradoxically, this work of possibility is facilitated by the complementary work of preservation - of remembering the great achievements, the failures, and the efforts of our forebears. Possibility must be tempered with this preservation, especially in times of rapid change, lest we become completely adrift on the sea of time and endless innovations that draw us further and further from the shore of our heritage and highest

potential.

The faculty as a whole presents us with a rich resource of experience, expertise, and imagination.

We rely on higher education faculty to achieve ends that are of high importance to our nation and our culture. Namely, to:

1. Ask the central questions of our time in all spheres - science, technology, society, government, the economy, philosophy and religion, the arts - and to vigorously and thoughtfully undertake the quest to find the best answers that can be found;

2. Disseminate and apply these answers and critically review the answers disseminated and applied by others;

3. Teach, in the classroom and in the field, based on the best thinking, inquiry, and practice currently known, and in so doing, to inspire and guide students to the fullest measure of personal development and self-knowledge;

4. Construct and maintain the great bridges necessary to connect our cultural heritage with our current lives and thinking;

5. "Speak truth to power", that is, to provide social and political critique with informed voices of reason and conscience;

6. Apply knowledge and skill to the amelioration of human problems of every kind.

These ends will not be furthered through pseudo-scientific measurement and mechanistic solutions to the challenges faced as a result of universal education. We need to build the culture of the faculty as the center of a new and deepened culture of learning and personal development. It does mean that reform is needed and change must come, but these things need not and should not be driven by narrow understanding of what matters. The balance lies in allowing the rational goal-seeking of the system to guide the lifeworld of the colleges and universities in being responsive to the larger needs of society and the lifeworld work of the colleges and universities to maintain the human and humane environment in which individuals and their experience are valued and cultivated. Policymakers, the general public, and educators must find their common values, which lie in the devotion to the cause of meaningful education. The quandary for policymakers remains how to use the blunt instrument of policy and limited public resources to make such education possible to the greatest extent possible. As Kemmis commented,

> Resolving problems of system steering... does not necessarily assist in dealing with problems of meaning, values and legitimacy, or identity and capability in educational research or education. Resolving problems in the lifeworld processes of cultural reproduction and transformation, social integration and individuation-socialization does not necessarily help with problems of steering education systems. There are separation currencies for dealing with the two kinds of problems, and gains in one cannot be bought or paid for in the currency of the other. (2000, p. 7)

Yet both currencies must be valued. How, then, is this balance struck that can build and sustain an orientation toward an ethic of verifiable cognitive achievement for all students, and for the professional and personal commitment of faculty and staff to the growth of all students? Rigid, data-driven accountability policies are simply inimical to the sustenance and cultivation of improvement-oriented and humane institutional cultures (lifeworlds) that can balance the needs for coordination, planning, and attention to systematic outcomes with the needs for interpersonal meaning, integrity, and communication. We may imagine that a relatively symbiotic relationship of system and lifeworld is possible, one in which accountability data are recognized as useful, though partial, indicators of student achievement and may have utility in making diagnostic, placement, or achievement decisions. On the other hand, system colonization of the lifeworld of the institution undermines essential qualities and drives it towards simple compliance with system demands, in which the data themselves become a priority and maximizing means while minimizing variance in them become ends in themselves and the threat of sanctions drives efforts to maximize production of "favorable" information. It is clear that no amount of tests, reporting requirements, analyses, or penalties can alone cultivate a democratic and caring lifeworld, because they undermine the conditions from which such a world is grown.

RESPONSIVE AND RESPONSIBLE COMMUNITY

The alternative view I am suggesting is an improvement orientation that aims for organizational integrity in a balance of responsiveness to system needs for information about achievement and quality and lifeworld needs for intersubjective meaning, communication, and community. Such culture cannot be externally mandated (e.g. - Aper, Culver, & Hinkle, 1990; Paine, 1994). As in all human endeavors, community is critical to meaning and outcome. If states wish to support the improvement of colleges and universities they would do well to support the means by which community is cultivated (e.g. – McDonald, 2002; Kezar, et al, 2005) and not succumb to the pursuit of technocratic ends alone, because ultimately, the quality of an institution of higher education grows from its ethical commitments; from the quality of its culture, which must reflect all the beauty and all the messiness of authentic human engagement and interaction.

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