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University or Knowledge Factory?

There is tempting heresy loose in the land. Very simply, it is the dangerous notion that state universities are simply another agency of state government, a unit to be policed, regulated, and whipped into a bureaucratic mold.

In this view, the university is simply a production unit in the knowledge industry, a kind of specialized factory processing human beings for strictly utilitarian ends.

Why have we come to this strange new vision of the university? For many reasons: because many believe that our business affairs are poorly managed, that we are guilty of competitive, self-serving expansion, that the faculty have become a protected featherbedding elite, and finally, that reform is paralyzed by internal quarrels. It is a harsh indictment, and it is being pursued with varying degrees of fervor and favor in many of the 50 states.

The remedy is equally harsh. If self-regulation has failed, if the state universities are "out of control," then by all means impose the classic remedy of strong, external regulation.

The power of decision on matters large and small has moved upward from individual institutions into the hands of strong state systems—with consequences we have only begun to grasp. In shared innocence, trustees and the American Association of University Professors hassle the president on matters that are now largely in the hands of the state system.

To the new managers the university is just another large system. It has raw material (students), a labor force (faculty and support personnel), instruments of production (classrooms, laboratories, libraries), a production schedule (academic requirements, classes admitted, and classes graduated), management (the trustees and central administration), and a production index (the cost of producing a student credit-hour).

The managerial revolution creates the exact reverse of the goals that are sought. The impact of multiple sources of regulation on the university is to discourage flexibility, cripple initiative, dilute responsibility, and ultimately to destroy true accountability.

The university which is regulated by everyone becomes, by the most bitter of ironies, accountable to no one. The invasion of external authority makes it virtually impossible to fix responsibility on anyone for educational results. With everyone in the act, who is finally accountable?

Everyone has a stake in the work of the university—parents, students, faculty, governors, legislators, business, the professions, taxpayers, trustees, even presidents. Slowly, clumsily, we in the universities have evolved our own special forms of "participatory management." It will do no good for any of us to rail against external intervention. Instead, our challenge and opportunity is to devise wider and deeper networks of consultation. If consultation with faculty is necessary and desirable, so by the same token is university consultation with governors, legislators, and state coordinating boards.

The universities are a very special kind of place. They are fragile as truth itself is fragile. They exist by public sufferance, and it is a marvel that the public at large supports with its dollars an institution that is independent, free-standing, openly critical of the conventional wisdom, friendly to disputation, enchanted with controversy, and hospitable to those who "think otherwise." May it always be so.—HAROLD L. ENARSON, *President, Ohio State University, Columbus 43210*

Adapted from a commencement address, University of New Mexico, May 1973.

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University or Knowledge Factory?

Harold L. Enarson

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