Pedagogical Plainsmen

Truman Lee Kelley once labeled as "pedagogical plainsmen" those teachers and administrators who were so obsessed with norms and averages that they busily shoveled off peaks of excellence to make plains of uniformity. The plainsmen are still at work, trying now to reduce differences among colleges and universities to achieve a homogenized postsecondary system of education. Worthy objectives lie behind some of their efforts; college is not solely for the smartest, and special help is needed to overcome early disadvantages. Yet if the plainsmen succeed too well they will weaken the whole educational system. In intellectual affairs, as in athletics, a setter of high standards can improve the performance of all the rest. Why was it, Kevles* has asked, that in the late 1800's geology in the United States so exceeded physics in quality and usefulness? His answer: high standards set by the U.S. Geological Survey toned up geology throughout the land, while physics had no such standard setter. The Westinghouse Science Talent Search, the portable fellowships of the National Science Foundation, and other rigorously selective programs have encouraged nonwinners as well as winners; how often one hears a comment such as "I didn't win, but I sure learned a lot in trying."

But high standards are now called undemanding and harmful. Thus some universities increase salaries across the board instead of on a merit basis; published ratings of the quality of graduate programs are disregarded; we are warned not to list universities in order of their research funds or the number of degrees conferred but to stick to a bland alphabetical listing; elite has become a dirty word; higher education has given way to postsecondary education; and university can now mean a large college.

Traditionally, colleges and universities of high quality have been valued both for themselves and as standard setters that contribute to the whole far out of proportion to their small number. This principle is still valid, but stating it is not enough, for resources are now often allocated on specific, segmental grounds, not on general principles. Federal funds have swung far in the direction of noncompetitive grants to students, while competitive support has dwindled. Peer review is accused of cronyism despite much evidence of its effectiveness in identifying research of quality. State legislatures find it easier to allocate funds to universities, colleges, and 2-year colleges by a numerical formula than to support each on the basis of its own distinctive requirements.

Champions of elite institutions are needed on all these and similar fronts. Fortunately, there is a currently popular concept that can reinforce their arguments: the values of diversity. We need different types of colleges, different kinds of achievement, different leagues of competition, and different types of rewards—all worthy of respect and support, but as diverse members of a larger community, neither to be treated alike nor to be expected to approach uniformity. Even within this diversity of institutions, however, champions of selective high quality will be needed to combat the plainsmen. They will be accused of making self-serving arguments, and will be called elitists. So be it.

Their arguments will be self-serving, but they will be nation-serving as well, as is the advocacy of high standards in other realms. And of course they will be elitists, in the older meaning of the word. That is the point, for what the plainsmen do not understand is that although their plains are sometimes shadowed, they are also nourished by the peaks.—DAEL WOLFE, University of Washington, Seattle 98195