

Overview

“On my campus, we seem to have more crime than ever before.” “On my campus, black and white students live in separate and sometimes conflicting worlds.” “On my campus, students are apathetic.” “On my campus, community is dead.” “Alcohol is such a problem on my campus.”

So went a conversation among the presidents of some of America’s most important colleges and universities at an American Council on Education board meeting in late 1988. These campus leaders have not been alone. Feelings of fragmentation and disconnection, even alienation and anomie among students, faculty, and staff in most sectors of American higher education are not new. Indeed, there are many who worry that these feelings have been intensifying. And, as the eighties evolved, more attention was focused on a perceived deterioration of campus life: increased intolerance and bigotry, in word and deed; increased crime against property and person; increased alcohol abuse.

Not surprisingly, in the last few years, there has also been an upsurge of interest among many on campus in seeking new forms for connection with each other (both between individuals and among small groups) and with the campus as a whole. There is renewed aspiration for community. If the metaphor of community runs deep in American higher education, it is because the term evokes both the central aspiration of a social and moral order grounded in the reconciliation of the individual and society and the yearning for an academic experience that connects the learner to ideas, to other learners, and, ultimately, to society. As evidence of social disintegration seems to proliferate, we ask ourselves, dismayed, Is community on campus possible?

Many of us continue to say Yes. Examining and revitalizing community on American campuses should be a central component of the national higher education agenda in the 1990s. This means discussing openly the limits to community of the whole that increasing complexity and diversity on campus impose, as well as the enrichment of the whole that pluralism offers. This means thinking creatively of ways to strengthen subcommunities without jeopardizing the whole, and ways to strengthen the whole without jeopardizing the parts.

The Challenge of Change

American higher education has evolved significantly during the past twenty-five years. Students are different. There is greater ethnic diversity—more Hispanics, more Asian-Americans, more foreign students, modestly more African-American students. The range of age is greater and the average student is significantly older. There are more women than men. Almost half of students attend part-time. The American higher educational system, with its more than twelve million students, is the most diverse college and university system in the world. This diversity is its strength and its challenge.

Faculty have changed too. They are older, since there has been only a recent and modest influx of new appointments in higher education. They are less mobile because there are fewer jobs to be had. They are publishing more because the reward system continues to be skewed toward research in much of higher education. (In large part, this is due to comprehensive universities' aspirations to become research institutions). Faculty are "perishing" less, though, because a larger proportion of them have tenure.

The typical American university has become much larger and more complex. Its priorities have become more diverse. It now is even more committed to serving external constituencies—government, business, and industry—while keeping the students minimally happy. On campus, student and faculty diversity has been accompanied by greater diversity of goals as well. Institutions must advance knowledge, provide applied expertise to social problems, offer special programs to poorly prepared students, and raise more money for research, physical plant, and intercollegiate athletics from diverse sources. Educating students has become a lower priority.

More than 77 percent of American students now attend public colleges and universities. So when we talk about American higher education, we are talking increasingly and overwhelmingly about publicly controlled education, accountable to and dependent upon state governments.

This increasing diversity of students, faculty, and goals has led to campuses that are complex confederations of subcommunities. In the face of this diversity and complexity, many people see no common ground at all except physical proximity. Physical proximity itself is more time limited. A greater percentage of those affiliated with our institutions of higher education are commuters and part-timers. Most students spend only part of their day and part of their year on campus. Many regular faculty, though now spending most of their adult lives on one campus, limit more the number of hours and days per week in attendance, although this varies by type of institution. Only administrators spend whole days, weeks, years, and lives on campus. Generally, individuals' connections to their campus have become more time limited and more narrowly instrumental.

Research Findings

We have structured our broad examination of student life and community on campus around three themes: (1) student (in)tolerance of difference; (2) the boundaries of institutional authority; and (3) the nature of student and faculty (dis)connections and their impact on the learning community.

In "Campus Life in Perspective: Historical Snapshots," we trace the major forces that have brought changes to the areas of student life that are our foci: (1) the opening of higher education to a more diverse student body; (2) the changing concepts of authority and responsibility within the institution; and (3) the changing nature of student-faculty interaction. Not surprisingly, the tensions that characterize American campuses are rooted in the history of higher education. There is little new under the historical sun.

We chose to single out two of the most problematic aspects of difference on campus: race and ethnicity, and gender. We found that American student culture is essentially segregated in terms of racial and ethnic-group relations, but that many individuals have significant and friendly interaction. We found little evidence of overt or premeditated racism, but ample evidence of misunderstanding and insensitivity. African-American students experience significantly more alienation than do other minorities, and therefore we have devoted more time to examining this tension. In regards to undergraduate women, we found that the climate on campus has improved substantially over the last decade. Nonetheless, sexual harassment, in its subtler and grosser forms, continues, and students rarely learn about the contributions of women in their courses.

We found campuses more regulated than they were in the 1970s and early 1980s. Although *in loco parentis* is no longer the basis of campus authority, many of the regulations that were supported by the theory are alive and well. We found everywhere more and better programs to educate students about responsible and safe behaviors, that is, about mature participation in the campus community and society more generally. As we inquired into student behavior and student attitudes toward peers and the institution, we discovered:

- that alcohol abuse remains the major social pathology. However, on every campus there are greater efforts being made to educate students about the risks of overdrinking.
- that Greek life remains important at most institutions despite the small percentage of students involved nationally. Attitudes varied from campus to campus and on the same campus, because fraternities and sororities raise complex questions about the role of cohesive subgroups in building or undermining community of the whole. Most institutions are trying to find ways to empower the positive aspects of Greek life and curb the negative ones.

- that the regulation of speech is a major problem on our campuses. Indeed, under pressure from minority and women's groups and aggrieved individuals, and deeply concerned about protecting students against incivility and harassment of a sexual or racial nature, some colleges and universities are putting freedom of speech at risk.
- that crime on campus, an issue that has captured the imagination of the media, is not epidemic. At present, there are inadequate data to determine whether or not it has increased. There is no doubt that most campuses are substantially safer than their surrounding communities. Concerted efforts over the past decade have improved security everywhere we visited. Facilities have improved, student awareness has increased.
- that the initiation and enforcement of most regulations on campus occur within a complex system where students often play responsible roles, with support from student affairs professionals and faculty.

After examining important aspects of student life outside the classroom, we turn to the heart of the matter—the academic experience—and look carefully at the relationship between students and faculty. We found that students on research campuses (almost 29 percent) have little contact with regular faculty; those at comprehensive institutions (almost 28 percent) have somewhat more; and those at community (38 percent) and liberal arts (5 percent) colleges have substantially more. For the majority of our students, though, faculty-student relations can be characterized as an absence of relationship. Large lecture classes that effectively block interaction continue to be the norm. Few students seek assistance outside the class and few faculty offer much of it. Repeatedly, individuals compared their institutions to fast food restaurants—providing efficient mass production of a product that contributes little to the long-range intellectual health of the student or the institution.

We have found that the majority of students are less engaged in all aspects of academic and nonacademic campus life.¹ A number of factors contribute to this minimal contact and minimal connectedness. Most students, partly by necessity, partly by choice, spend the bulk of their time on activities other than going to class and studying. Most traditional-age students tend to do paid work for at least twenty hours a week, reserve long weekends for partying, and spend three to four hours a day in casual interaction with friends. Most adult students work thirty-six hours or more a week for pay, and commit their weekends to their families or friends. Academic work may actually be the lowest priority of both traditional-age and adult students.

Faculty culture varies according to each institution and its commitment to the priority of teaching. At community colleges and liberal arts colleges, we found faculty quite committed to the classroom and providing significant academic support to students. At aspiring comprehensive campuses and

research institutions, teaching was the lowest priority for regular faculty. Students saw mainly adjuncts and graduate students.

We found that students rarely experience the campus as an academic community. Since they view it primarily as a place to acquire the credential necessary to get a job, this lack of intellectual community does not distress them. Faculty and academic administrators, for the most part, do little to strengthen learning communities on their campuses. Faculty, indeed, understand that reducing their demands on students can free up time for research and publication.

It is ironic and disturbing that neither faculty nor students find this lack of interaction a cause for serious concern. Surveys show the great majority of students "satisfied" with the quality of their instruction. Many faculty, by choice or by necessity, do not place a high priority on fostering intellectual community in their classrooms.

Perspectives on Community

In seeking to understand the reality and the aspiration on today's campuses, we have chosen the analytical lens of community. The theme of community, or more precisely, eclipse of community, in America is an old one. For more than one hundred years intellectuals, activists, religious leaders, and educators have bemoaned the decline of community in our increasingly urban and modern society. In the history of higher education, too, the growth of the large and complex university, which has accelerated exponentially since World War II, has been accompanied by the concern that we have lost community.

Certainly the term "community" is ubiquitous, in higher education as elsewhere. The cynic might propose as axiomatic that the actual experience of community exists in inverse proportion to the frequency of the use of the term by important group members. Indeed, today, a term that traditionally described a relatively small number of people living in the same area and linked by common values, practices, and goals, is often used to denote sheer proximity (neighborhoods within large suburbs, for example) and narrowly focused interest groups (the environmental community, the business community).

Yet, although usage has been watered down, it is quite clear that the term "community" still elicits a strong response from many of us, even when we are not quite able to explain why. The word carries with it historical resonance and metaphorical power, linking us to a personal saga of family and neighborhood and, perhaps, to a national saga of westward settlement and democratic ideals. In higher education, it conjures up enclaves of scholarship and learning (community of learning) and also college spirit associated with the private clubs, fraternities, and sororities that have figured so prominently

in student life. Everywhere we went, people responded strongly to our topic: the campus as community. It excited strong reactions and lively debates.

In exploring community on campus, we have reflected on values, goals, and practices that individuals share and that constitute the basis for coming together and staying together, the basis for a sense of belonging. This search for common ground that connects individuals to groups and to the whole has informed much of our work. We have found affirmative community of the whole on campuses today relatively circumscribed.

To explore community on campus also has meant being attentive to a range of complexities. Since we have emphasized large institutions that are structurally complex and that have substantial socioeconomic and racial and ethnic diversity, we have been inundated with complexity of all kinds. We have examined complex questions to which there are no easy answers: To what extent can a given community include contradictory values? What are the costs and benefits of difference and dissent? What factors are weakening the campus learning community and how can institutions reinforce this foundation of higher education?

The invocation of community always refers to interests and values that transcend a single individual and therefore constrain his or her choices. Thus we have focused on the relations between individuals and the community. For example, does a pledge's individual right to security and privacy limit the ritual of initiation through hazing that contributes to the continuity of the community in a fraternity? Or does the university have the right to require students to take courses in ethnic or women's studies?

The relationship of subcommunities to other subcommunities and to the community of the whole has been likewise central. In some cases, values may be completely consonant, but we found many examples of partial or even complete dissonance. And in these cases, who decides which community should prevail? Dartmouth is a well-known example. The members of the *Dartmouth Review* seem to constitute a community (some of whose members are off campus). The values they espouse conflict strongly with minority ones, and also with the more liberal values of the community of the whole at Dartmouth.

We evoke these complexities, not because we shall be able to resolve them into simple formulae, but rather to underscore the limits of our *tour d'horizon* of life on American campuses as we enter the 1990s. We have found some interesting surprises and have also come to confirm some earlier conclusions. But as you continue through this book, it is essential to remember that our conclusions are informed by the understanding of community as a complex concept, one that incorporates the values of a democratic society encouraging learning and participation by all citizens of the campus.

Since we believe that the health of community on campus is essential to the mission of American higher education, we articulate a post-*in loco paren-*

tis theory of campus community that can guide renewal. This Compact for a Pluralistic Community includes four major principles: (1) the centrality of learning; (2) the importance of freedom of thought and expression; (3) the standard of justice in assessing all individual and community actions; and (4) respect for difference in the diverse campus communities manifested in civility of action. The recommendations that conclude our book are meant to support the creation of pluralistic learning communities on our nation's campuses.

In our vision of pluralistic campus community built on the foundation of a principled compact, implemented with honesty and integrity, individuals and subcommunities representing the pluralistic society of today have substantial autonomy once they enroll in the core values of the campus. They also have the right and responsibility to participate in the governance of the community of the whole. Finally, and most importantly, they enter into a compact for caring that acknowledges the mutual responsibility to respect individual and group differences and to promote high-quality relationships with others.

Lack of engagement, social fragmentation, and packaged and passive learning do not an academic community make. This nation and the world require men and women who are intellectually and civically well prepared, who have been educated to sustain and appreciate community. Our colleges and universities have a privileged role to play in this worthy endeavor.