

## On the higher learning in America: some comments

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THE MOST fundamental misconception of many leading institutions of higher learning is that they are primarily institutions of higher learning. Money talks in academia as elsewhere, and what that money says on most campuses is “do research.” Johns Hopkins University, for example, has about 3,000 undergraduates. They pay about \$14,000 a year in tuition. If *every* undergraduate at Johns Hopkins paid full tuition, accepting no financial aid, that would add up to \$42 million—approximately one-tenth of what Johns Hopkins receives in federal research grants alone.

There are more than a dozen university campuses that receive more than \$100 million each from the federal government for research. These include, obviously, public as well as so-called private universities. It would be naive to expect teaching, and especially the teaching of undergraduates, to be the primary concern of institutions whose money and renown come primarily from research.

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*This article is adapted from Dr. Sowell's remarks at the Harvard Club of New York on the occasion of the publication of his book Choosing a College (Harper & Row, \$6.95). The discussion was sponsored by the Manhattan Institute and was held on September 14, 1989.*

### Teachers and researchers

Considerable evidence, both impressionistic and statistical, suggests that teaching—education—is one of the lower priorities at many places that we continue to call institutions of higher education.

Among the impressionistic evidence are the comments of students in such publications as *The Confidential Guide to Courses at Harvard-Radcliffe* or *Princeton's Student Course Guide*. Words like “disorganized,” “rambling,” and “incoherent” appear again and again in descriptions of professors’ lectures at both these institutions. The words of praise are also sometimes revealing. For example, “a research star who actually considers teaching worthwhile,” or “one of the few professors who actually answers his own telephone.”

Outsiders’ observations paint a similar picture. An accreditation panel visiting Harvard in 1987 concluded that “only the most aggressive and persistent undergraduate” was likely to have any “faculty-student interaction outside of the classroom” with senior Harvard professors. *Time* magazine characterized these professors as “too engaged in their own research, too busy with outside consulting or just too lordly to bother with anything so trivial as an undergraduate.”

Not all the faculty are this way, of course. One who apparently was not was a young faculty member who won a teaching award at Harvard two years ago. Today he teaches at the City University of New York. His contract was not renewed at Harvard. When asked, before he departed, what he would do differently in the future, he said that he would spend more time on research. Anyone who has spent hours organizing a single lecture knows that this young man’s future teaching may well suffer from the reordering of his priorities, even though his career will benefit. None of this is peculiar to Ivy League schools. Anyone who is familiar with Berkeley, or UCLA, or many other research universities, will recognize the pattern. Some professors at such institutions regard the Teacher of the Year Award as the kiss of death. There is some dispute about this, and to avoid controversy I won’t enter that dispute. I will, however, say that I personally know three different professors at three different institutions who have gotten the Teacher of the Year Award and were then told that their contracts would not be renewed.

There was also a young colleague of mine at Cornell twenty years ago who was an outstanding teacher, though he was fortunate enough to avoid getting any awards for it. When passing by his office one day I noticed stacks of paper on the table outside; I looked at them and found all sorts of homework assignments, extra material to be handed out in class. As I looked at it, I was just amazed at the ingenious examples he had thought of, and all the superb ways of getting across the basic concepts of economics. I thought that this must take an awful lot of time—and immediately after that I thought that his contract would probably not be renewed. He is now working for the Federal Reserve Board.

The question as to whether our leading institutions of higher education should be renamed institutions of higher research cannot be settled on the basis of anecdotes alone. Among the more striking statistical pieces of evidence are studies of undergraduates who go on to Ph.D.s. Some of the leading Ph.D.-granting institutions in the country have fewer of their own undergraduates go on to get Ph.D.s than many little-known liberal-arts colleges. For example, a smaller percentage of the graduates of Yale, Stanford, Berkeley, and Columbia have gone on to receive Ph.D.s than the graduates of Wabash College, Harvey Mudd College, Cooper Union, or New College in the University of South Florida.

There are some problems with these statistics, as different colleges draw on different social classes, people with different interests, some of whom go on to professions not requiring a Ph.D. But even when you make all allowances for that, the pattern is clear and pervasive: the smaller independent schools are greatly over-represented among the places where a high percentage of students go on to receive Ph.D.s. These places are, of course, teaching institutions. Even among the research universities, the universities that are smaller (in terms of undergraduate enrollment) have much better records than the larger ones.

The number-one university in this respect is the University of Chicago, where, over a thirty-year period, approximately 25 percent of all graduates went on to receive Ph.D.s. Harvard had 16 percent. None of the top seventy institutions in this regard had as many as 12,000 undergraduates or as many as 20,000 students total on campus.

This means that Berkeley, always ranked among the top institutions in the country, is not even among the top five dozen when it comes to the proportion of its own students who go on to receive

Ph.D.s. Schools like Eckerd College, Fisk, and Birmingham-Southern rank above Berkeley in that respect. So do some of the smaller campuses in the University of California system: UC-San Diego, UC-Irvine, UC-Riverside, and so on. It's hard to see what advantage any of these other less-distinguished campuses have over Berkeley and UCLA, other than the fact that they are smaller and can therefore teach students.

### **Matching schools with students**

Against this background, it's especially ironic that so many high school students and their parents are so desperate to gain admission to a relative handful of top-level colleges—or rather, big-name colleges and universities. They're not necessarily top level.

Recently I was on a radio talk show, and a frantic mother phoned in to ask me to suggest some gimmicks that her son could use to get the attention of admissions-committee members at some of the "best colleges," as she put it. She was deadly serious. In fact, you could hear her hyperventilating. I felt sorry for her and I felt even more sorry for her son, with a mother like this on his back. It did no good to tell her that there really is no such thing as a "best college." There are many colleges that are best for a particular individual, but not for that individual's brother or sister or neighbor or classmate. She wanted to know how to get into those best colleges. It did no good to tell her that the point is not to rank colleges but to match colleges with individuals; she didn't want to hear that.

I tried to tell her the student does not get a better education if the class is moving at a faster pace than he or she can keep up with. He may be perfectly capable of learning the material at a normal pace and yet be completely lost when it's covered at a pace that he can't follow. Sometimes it's just a matter of not having enough reading speed or not being as fast in grasping mathematical principles. This is not to say that the student is incompetent in either area. If you have a math score of 720 on the SAT, that puts you in the top 1 percent nationwide. It puts you in the bottom quarter at Cal Tech.

Even those who understand that big names and top ranking do not make a college best in any educational sense often seek such institutions from a career point of view. The argument is that when you've gotten a degree with that magic name on it, then the doors open for you in the world and you have higher income and so on. I'm always fascinated with studies of the income differences be-

tween graduates of one college and another college. I'm sure that my graduating class at Harvard had a very high average income. We had a Rockefeller and the Aga Khan. The rest of us didn't have to do anything. I try to tell people that you will not become any taller by joining the basketball team, even though basketball players are taller than other people.

If it's money that you want, a degree in engineering from Georgia Tech will get you more money than a degree in history or English from Harvard. If you're thinking of going to a top medical school, law school, or business school, those who run these schools know what kind of education the different colleges have. They are not going to be dazzled by big names. Various deans from the leading schools of engineering were asked to rate the undergraduates who came to them from different institutions. They ranked the students from Rose-Hulman Institute and from Harvey Mudd College above the engineering students at Princeton. When deans from the leading law schools were asked to rank the undergraduates who came to them from different colleges, they ranked the students from Davidson College above the students from most of the Ivy League colleges. If you're trying to get in and impress those people, you do it by having a solid education.

The prestige of the postgraduate school itself is obviously important in the world. But after you've gotten your MBA from Wharton, or your medical degree from Johns Hopkins, or your engineering degree from MIT, no one is going to ask where you went to college before that. In emphasizing the importance of teaching at teaching institutions, I don't mean to suggest that research is necessarily a dereliction of duty. Institutions serve multiple purposes, and of course it depends on what you're looking for. But if what you're looking for is the best undergraduate education, then you have to realize that other people have very different priorities and very different agendas.

### **Superficial reforms**

Those who want to restore teaching to a higher priority within the colleges and universities often misconceive the very nature of teaching, and promote some superficial reforms that create more problems than they solve. For example, two perennial panaceas for teaching are student evaluations and classroom visits by administrators and colleagues to monitor what is going on. Student evaluation can be very valuable in some kinds of situations—for

There was another professor, whom we can call Jones. His ex-students would say, "Oh God, we had Jones," and they would launch into a denunciation of the man, vehemently in many cases. Every student in my class who got a "B" or above at that point had studied under Professor Jones. One professor had taught them, and the other professor had impressed them. But how could they have known what was left out of Smith's course and why that was more or less important than what was covered in Jones's course?

The idea of having monitors in the classroom, which is always very popular with administrators, assumes that teaching is classroom management. Some of the best teachers are people who are terrible in the classroom. I had a professor at Harvard who really changed my professional career positively, but as a classroom performer, he was terrible. He would wander into the classroom—you couldn't say that he walked purposefully into the classroom; it was as if he had taken the wrong turn and knew of no graceful way to back out again. As he lectured, he would walk over to the window and become fascinated with the cars in the traffic circle. Then after a while, remembering that we were still there, he would turn and say something more out of politeness than anything else. But the fact is that this man had a first-rate mind, and he recognized other first-rate minds. And his syllabus introduced us to first-rate minds.

As a result of reading one article by George Stigler on Ricardian economics, I decided that I would major in the history of economic thought, and that indeed I would study under George Stigler. So I applied for graduate school to go to Columbia where Stigler was listed in the catalog, and only when I got there did I learn that Stigler had gone to Chicago. And so the next year I went to Chicago. But there were hundreds of articles about Ricardian economics; why did the professor choose the one by Stigler? Because he understood that Stigler could cut through the murk, devastate fallacies, and show what Ricardian economics, and economics in general, was all about. That's what teaching is all about and there are no easy ways to reach it.

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**Question:** One of the things that you talk about in your book is the mismatch between the student and the school. There have been so many incidents of overt racism on campus these days; do you think that contributes to it?

**Sowell:** Absolutely. I am convinced of it for a number of reasons. One is the pattern of these violent outbreaks of racism on campus. The conventional wisdom is that this is all due to the Reagan administration, to the conservative mood in the country. There are institutions that keep track of these things, and their statistics showed that there were more of these outbreaks in Massachusetts alone than in the entire South. You find them at places like Berkeley and the University of Massachusetts and Wellesley much more than you're likely to find them at conservative campuses like Hillsdale, or Whitman, or Davidson.

There is also international evidence. I'm working on a book on preferential policy internationally and wherever those policies are put in, there is this backlash. The longer the policies have been in place, the worse the backlash. The worst places are India and Sri Lanka, which have had these policies for several decades. Sri Lanka is an especially sad case because they began with what were regarded as model race relations—far better, let's say, than they've been in the United States. Within a decade people were burning each other alive in the streets. The civil war got so bad that some political groups began to have a vested interest in the polarization, as such, quite aside from the substantive divisions.

The notion that we seem to have in all our foreign policy—that no matter what the strife is about, you can always come in with some nice compromise that you've worked out back in the State Department and give it to both sides and they'll say, "Hey, why didn't we think of this?"—is naive. No, there are people in Sri Lanka who have a vested interest in the continuation of the strife because that serves their power; on both sides, among the Tamils and the Sinhalese, there are factions who are killing numerous members of their own group because these members want to compromise. This is not one of the happier examples.

India has gone this route as well. There is a tremendous amount of recurring violence over these preferential policies. In the state of Gujarat alone as many as two hundred people have been killed in riots set off by medical-school quotas. Ironically, in a recent year, there were only six places set aside in the quotas—and forty-two people died in riots over those six places.

Some people have argued that the objection is that one group is losing something to another group and that this is the fundamental reason for the backlash, but that doesn't stand up to the evidence either. There are many programs that provide special benefits to

don't remember what the standards were exactly, but they were not impressive standards. You could get in hundreds of points below the average of the U.S. Air Force Academy if you belonged to the right group.

I never saw any data on how many of each of these different groups had survived the rigors of the academy. Even those data, which are usually unavailable, are becoming less and less reliable as you get what someone has called "affirmative grading," which is also a worldwide phenomenon. In Soviet Central Asia the professors are under pressure to pass more central Asians. In Israel, at one time at least, there was a ruling that you could not leave back in the public schools a disproportionate number of Sephardic Jews as compared to the Ashkenazi.

One of the many illusions of these policies is that we have such total control over them that we can say that this will be a transitory policy for this period, and then we'll do this, or we will have it at the stage of search but not at the stage of admission, or at the stage of admission but not at the stage of judging and graduating and so forth. And in country after country this has proved to be an illusion.

I think I'll leave you with the classic example of Pakistan, which back in the 1940s instituted preferential programs for the East Pakistanis because they were greatly underrepresented in all sorts of occupations. But like so many other preferential policies, they began to spread from the East Pakistanis to other groups, further and further removed from the original rationale. The preferences were supposed to last five or ten years, but they kept on being extended; this all started in the forties and back in 1984 the late president Zia extended them until 1994—even though by 1984 East Pakistan had become a separate country called Bangladesh. The people who were the original beneficiaries of this program were no longer part of Pakistan, but so many other groups had piggy-backed on them that now it became politically impossible to get rid of the preferential programs.