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Institutional Development: Impressions From Abroad

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(A chance discussion between the collaborators on the occasion of Dr. Rau's visit to Texas Tech University in 1982 stimulated this article. It maintains the first person style of the German observer, even though the American counterpart has integrated additional material.)

Higher education research has pointed out that the roots of the American system of higher education lie in the European, or, more directly, in the British and German traditions of tertiary education. Since the first quarter of our century, however, American higher education has experienced independent development and enormous growth. Today it is the most influential higher education and research system (Ben-David & Zloczower, 1980).

For some years I have followed trends in higher education in the Federal Republic of Germany (F.R.G.) as well as the debate on reforms in higher education in other western countries, especially in the United States of America. This interest exposed me to some of the enormous literature on the American higher education system

and led to reflections on the status, dynamics, and problems of the American system, its dimension, variety, and diversity. I imagined a lively, boundless, excellent system which could serve as a model for higher education systems in industrialized western countries.

That doesn't mean that I, as a foreign observer, am uncritical about the limits, restrictions, and disturbances of the American system which numerous studies and reports document. I considered them, but, in general, they did not destroy my overall positive picture, perhaps bearing out the old adage that "the grass looks always greener on the other side of the fence." A Fulbright grant in 1982 provided an opportunity for me to travel for six weeks through the United States and to visit in ten universities in seven states, to talk to scholars and administrators, and to get useful insights into the American system of higher education and institutional and professional development.

I realized at once that it is next to impossible—at least unwise—after only six weeks 'on location' for me to claim to offer a valid description of the American system of higher education, even if I had a relatively sound theoretical background. During my visit I saw some of the more famous institutions (University of Michigan, University of Wisconsin-Madison, University of Chicago, UCLA, Berkeley), and they strongly influenced my perceptions even though I knew they comprised only a minority of institutions. But less famous institutions confirmed most of my perceptions. Soon it became obvious that American higher education has not only "three thousand futures," as noted by a recent publication (Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education, 1980), but nearly as many "presents," and even quite a number of "pasts," making it impossible to analyze and describe the system as a whole.

Still, it seems useful to sketch some impressions. Of course, impressions are often contingent and provisional. They are not systematic and do not immediately lead to valuable insights and practical results. But they are not useless! Naïve amazement at existing situations can throw a new light on these situations for those who are familiar

with them, even if the conclusions are wrong or incomplete. It is not my intention here to provide new insights about American institutions of higher education but rather to stress some issues which are perhaps trivial for some American observers but have innovative implications for other systems of higher education.

Not too long ago, Germans interested in educational reform looked at the Swedish system, and the Swedish grass looked greener too (Premfors, 1982). But after I started to look at the "American university" (Parsons & Platt, 1973) and the higher education system in general, I became more and more interested and fascinated by strands I recognized on the western side of the Atlantic. My focus is only comparative, not systematic, analytical, empirical, or theoretically elaborated. My purpose is rather to describe, from a distance, impressions of the higher education system in the United States, to portray conditions which seem unique and to draw some obvious comparisons to education in the F.R.G. Americans who look critically and somewhat fatalistically at their own system will discover that their grass is as green (or perhaps as withered) as it is in other places.

SIZE AND DIVERSITY

Looking from abroad at the American system of higher education, one is impressed—at least at first glance—by the great number of students in the system. In contrast to the approximately eleven million students enrolled in about 3,000 institutions of higher education in the U.S. in 1978-79, the F.R.G. had about one million students in 328 institutions in 1979. With about three and a half times the population of the F.R.G., the U.S. has eleven times the number of students and ten times the number of institutions. It is even more instructive to look at demographic characteristics. The proportion of people between the age of 18 and 24 who take part in some kind of tertiary education in the U.S. is now more than 40%, the F.R.G. about 20%.

What are the reasons for these impressive differences?

Has the U.S. really reached a higher level of equal educational opportunity? There are enormous difficulties associated with answering such questions, and they cannot be decided here. But there are hints found in the differences between the two systems. First, it seems important to consider that the area of the U.S. is 38 times that of the F.R.G., with obvious consequences, at least regarding the number of institutions. Regional educational needs promote large numbers of colleges and universities.

Even more important is the distinct structure of the two systems. Besides the fact that there are no private institutions of higher education in the F.R.G. (a first private university started some activities in 1982!), it is worth mentioning that American institutional variety has no counterpart in the Federal Republic. In the United States, about one-fifth of the students attend a private college or university. This, perhaps, has some implications for the need and level of funding support from public coffers.

Since the early 1960's, German students have paid no tuition in the F.R.G., although in times of retrenchment there are considerations of reintroduction of a tuition system. Financial aid is given to students from lower social strata (about 33% of all students). But many students must work as well as study. In 1979, 31% stated that they had to get a job to finance their living while 58% said that they sometimes worked to earn some money. Regarding job opportunities, I've gotten the impression that the American institutions of higher education, perhaps because of their 'commercialization', provide better and more jobs on campus for their students than German institutions are able to do.

INSTITUTIONAL IDENTITY

In all the universities I visited, I found impressive student centers with large book stores, restaurants, and big shops; they sold everything from pencils and rubbergums to an enormous selection of clothing and useless things, all showing the name or the sign of the alma mater. I think that there lies more than only a crude commercial interest

behind that, something valuable and unique. I've found that in sports activities, too. It shows a kind of identification with the institution which is not evident in the European counterparts.

An inspiring event in that respect was my attendance at a football game at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. I cannot imagine that such enthusiasm and involvement of all groups of the university—from freshmen to full professors—as well as of the surrounding community could be created in Germany. I know that many criticize the phenomenon—the football craze—in American higher education. Some almost angrily point to the differentiation of advancement in research, scholarly success, and athletic triumph. However, the representatives of the institution are involved, and, if the team wins, everybody seems to be proud. This identification obviously produces ties which very often last a whole lifetime and affect influential alumni. This relationship does not exist in German universities. Perhaps I'm wrong, but I think that the ties between the university and the surrounding community are much closer in the U.S., that the extracurricular activities in which all groups participate are much more important, and that the institution plays an important part in daily life beyond the formal and ordinary duties connected with studies, teaching, and research. These ties surely provide opportunities for faculty to become involved in and assist with professional development of individuals in many kinds of endeavors, and the faculty can take advantage of the opportunities for self development as well.

What creates this kind of identification which has deep ongoing consequences for the institution? Is it the respectable sum of tuition which has to be paid, an elitist approach, or the still existing scholarly spirit which we (Germans) may have already lost or think of as unsuitable in an egalitarian society? In some way, these and other components may play a part, and it is difficult to decide which is most important. In any case, on the surface, these have—I believe—constructive effects for the institution. Problems of vandalism, of isolation, and of too little co-operation are less relevant, or at least less visible, in the

institutions I've seen. Perhaps it was the first view which provided a biased look; many academicians are concerned by the isolation and lack of involvement of fairly large numbers of individual students. Many of these academicians work to improve their teaching as a means of reducing that student isolation.

It is apparent that the institutions themselves have an interest in creating a stimulating, attractive climate and good surroundings in order to compete for students and their tuition money. But institutional variety is a result. And a great number of potential consumers constitute a continuing market. The resulting diversity leads to flexibility, creativity, freshness, and continuous innovation. It leads on the other side to differentiation and hierarchy, to elitism and obsolescence, to high and poor quality; in one word, to inequality! Does obvious inequality in support provide equality of opportunity?

An engaged German educational sociologist must be unsatisfied with such results! But aren't there positive consequences and results too? Yes, I believe so! It is well nigh undisputable that the market-oriented 'consumerism' and the diverse system of higher education have created widespread possibilities to teach, to study, and to do research in numerous subjects and fields, to earn degrees in different programs, colleges and schools. Conditions create a more varied student body with more heterogeneous motives and intentions than can be found in German universities. It produces an unbelievable number of courses and different educational accents—religious, cultural, ideological, and professional, among others.

PROGRAM STRUCTURE

Most obvious to an observer from abroad is the differentiation between undergraduate and graduate studies, a distinction which cannot be found to the same degree in the F.R.G. Studies at institutions of the university type in Germany mainly lead to two types of degrees: the diploma and the 'Staatsexamen' (government examination), the prerequisite for entering the civil service (including all

teaching at primary and secondary schools, legal and medical professions). In addition, a close connection exists between the degree and the higher levels of the occupational system. That means that the diploma earned via the 'Staatsexamen' is a necessity for getting a high level job. A student who has failed to get the degree has received no formal benefit from his or her studies. The impossibility of stepping out or stopping studies after a certain period of time puts an enormous stress on many students. They fear failure and don't dare to try the examination. These fears cause them to stay in the institution too long and possibly to drop out in their early twenties without any formal qualifications. The relatively homogeneous and one-dimensional structure of the German higher education system implies other forms of inequality which the diversity of the American system avoids. The broad range of degrees in the U.S., as reflected in titles and programs, is tremendous to the external observer.

The lack of connection between degrees and jobs seems to make the American system and the people in it more open, more flexible, more individual and, in the long run, possibly more successful. Even if it is likely that a Harvard graduate will usually get a more influential, more prestigious first job than a graduate from, for example, Texas Tech University, relative mobility and flexibility characterize American higher education. I'm convinced of that, insofar as it opens up prospects for more equality and equal educational opportunity.

In another related aspect, the German system seems to be less rigid. In many fields of study, the German student is quite free to plan and design his or her study program, to choose lectures and courses of personal interest, and to decide when he or she feels fit to take the final exam. That's a remnant of the old ideal of academic freedom, to study in 'solitude and independence' ('Einsamkeit und Freiheit'). Even in today's mass university, it is still an influential—and I believe dysfunctional—concept. It often results in disorganized "programs," too lengthy a time of study, and high drop out rates. The American system, which often has distribution requirements, seems to draw

more sensibly upon combined mature judgment than does a system of open course selection on the part of the students.

Even an existing counseling system does not guarantee good results. The lack of a well-designed curriculum in German institutions often leads to specialized training in a chosen field without real training for a vocation. This training still has to be done on the job (American readers will recognize that this criticism is also frequently levelled at American higher education). In comparison, the structuring of American undergraduate and graduate curricula seems to be more goal-oriented, to be based on more intensive motivation, and to lead to a more adequate involvement in the studies, the institution, and the future working perspective. It also places responsibilities on the faculty to meet a variety of needs.

I know that not all of these problems are solved in the United States, that new and different problems always arise. Otherwise institutions would not be living and lively organizations. Diversity stimulates experiments and produces solutions—good and bad. In any case, the problems are dealt with in various, competitive, innovative and comprehensive ways.

INDIVIDUAL FACULTY DEVELOPMENT

In the U.S., many institutions provide more organized assistance to individual faculty members than is the case in Germany. Support for individual scholarship and teaching improvement are most common. There are many conferences and printed or filmed materials available which relate to self-improvement in various ways. I understand that it takes individual initiative to pursue those, but the institutions seem to provide more assistance. Perhaps it is necessary, because of great distances, to expect more travel support for national meetings. But I also observed that individual institutions, and sometimes colleges within the universities, have organized programs for faculty development.

This atmosphere of collegial helpfulness seems aimed

at individual improvement. Apparently, this is a developing trend and one which seems so useful that it would be expected to spread. This seems to be also a fertile field to grow improved methods of assistance.

RESEARCH

Depending upon one's orientation, the integration of research and teaching, or the conflicting time demands of the two, increasingly characterize the American university. This trend seems to be less well established in public colleges. In German institutions, the tradition of research institutes developed in a way not copied directly in the United States. Basic orientations of the European chair and the American departmental systems are found still in the current research operations. The relationship of ongoing research projects and activities to undergraduate teaching is more direct and pronounced in the U.S. system. The grafting of the German university to the root stock of the English college, which typically characterized American institutional development, has apparently produced a more prolific growth than has the continued careful tending of the institute approach in the F.R.G. The reforms in the German universities during the 1970's resulted in a number of changes, among them a shared voting strength among professoriat (including junior faculty) and students. The replacement of traditional faculty approaches, formerly headed by a chair or *Ordinarius*, has resulted in a system involving comprehensive sets of committees. This system needs further refinement before its research potential can be realized.

PROFESSIONAL RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

Variety can also be found in higher education research. The quantity and quality of research on higher education conducted in the American universities, the many different and qualified journals specializing in higher education, and the centers for studies in higher education at so many institutions, providing the system with effectively trained, well

educated and qualified administrative personnel, are really impressive. There is no such training in the F.R.G., even if there is a demand for qualified university administrators.

In many cases the German institutions of higher education are administered by jurists (sometimes by economists) who have a 'normal' education in their fields and only by chance ended in university administration. Even if they do a good job, there remains quite often a kind of discrepancy and tension between 'academe' and 'accounting.' It is perhaps noteworthy that each institution is administered by a full-time manager who is responsible for the whole range of administrative affairs (Fallon, 1980). I have the (perhaps utopian) optimism that training and education in higher education will make future administrators more sensitive to the touchy problems of serving students and scholars in times of scarce resources for the benefit of the whole academic community.

German universities conduct little institutionalized higher education research. When university reform was in its affluent stage in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, there were quite a number of state funded institutes doing useful work outside the universities. Most still exist (with fewer personnel and less resources), but they did, and do today, mostly applied research and special studies for the state or federal government. Only a relatively small number of scholars from different fields carry on independent research. They have little cooperation or feedback, little money, and nearly no response from the scientific community or the affected public. Therefore, it isn't too strange that there is no specialized journal for higher education in the Federal Republic of Germany. Strange it is, however, in my opinion, that exactly the institution which defines its purpose as the search for knowledge produces only very little about itself and does not promote such research.

This kind of concern contrasts with continuing and prominent debates about teaching and curriculum in the United States, wherein there are many efforts at discussing and solving actual problems and dealing with future ones. These efforts are conducted in a very pragmatic and

goal-oriented way. Enormous amounts of literature are produced, and ingenious proposals are presented. But the relatively small impact of theoretically oriented contributions is striking. The interest in developing theories of higher education seems as insignificant as it is, for example, in Germany.

It is relatively easy to find some reasons for the prominence of research on higher education in the United States. Cause and effect seem closely connected. The variety and the dimensions of the system create numerous problems and generate manifold issues to be solved and managed. Efforts for teaching improvement in a single institution (Osterman, 1984) illustrate variety in that important area. The different fundamentals and prerequisites of higher education in the United States—organization, structure, admission, and financing, among others—and unique problems of the system—the rights and opportunities of minority groups, for example—necessarily stimulate the search for solutions. So far, solutions seem to be situational and time bound, but perhaps from these beginnings, models and theories will develop for testing.

Many of these issues exist in the F.R.G. too—but on a much smaller scale. We don't have and can't have the same variety in higher education. Thus, we often look in amazement at the American system, getting incentives from there and sometimes even believing that imitation should solve our problems. Undoubtedly, pure imitation would not help in successfully dealing with German problems. But the look at American higher education remains fascinating and, in a wider perspective, very helpful.

SUMMARY

At the end of these impressions of the American higher education system as they developed through direct perception, discussions, and the study of literature, it seems worthwhile to draw some brief conclusions. It is apparent that the situation in both the American and the German higher education systems is comparable, that both have had to deal with similar problems in the past, and will in

the future.

Burton Clark (1982) has related the problems of higher education to four "basic values"—justice, competence, liberty, and loyalty. The contradictions of these values and efforts to act according to them (and their interpretations) constitute strong issues in higher education all around the world. Reconciliation of equality, ability, independence, and commitment seems unattainable but not unapproachable in the development of institutions.

The observation of efforts at institutional development in America have been mentioned. These efforts are understood to be inconsistent throughout the many institutions across the country. The movement toward individual development and, probably to a lesser extent, overall institutional development does seem to be growing and becoming more institutionalized. These attempts relate to both the teaching and research dimensions of the American schools. The variety within the system leads one to expect variety in the approaches to developmental activities. There are not as many, nor as varied, approaches in the F.R.G. at this time. As mentioned, there is often a lack of theoretical thinking evident in the studies of activities to improve the academy in both countries.

Efforts for reform and experimentation in higher education in both countries can be interpreted as a 'perpetual dream' (Grant & Riesman, 1978). Inducements and causes for the shaping of effective and adequate institutions of higher education are overall quite similar and are bound to similar values and intentions. Strong and direct attention to individual professional and institutional development must be continued if the dreams are to be realized.

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