The Emerging Third Stage in Higher Education Planning
by George Keller
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George Keller, SCUP Founders Award recipient and former executive editor of Planning for Higher Education passed away earlier this year. He had a productive and influential career as a higher education thought leader. In his memory, we are republishing here an article first published in this journal in 1999 after being received with acclaim by a standing room only audience at SCUP-34 in Atlanta, Georgia.

Not only was George Keller the “founding father” of academic planning -- integrated, comprehensive planning for higher education -- as we know it, but he remained a “pillar” of the planning community and an active and provocative thinker throughout his life. In “The Emerging Third Stage...” George gave us two sets of fresh perspectives that continue to have great value as we think about the future of higher education planning. First, in plain, no nonsense language he classified America’s higher education institutions in terms of their propensity for effective institutional planning, identifying state colleges and universities, colleges of technology, regional private colleges, less endowed private colleges, and two-year colleges as the most fruitful ground for new forms of planning. Second, he looked into his crystal ball and predicted that the most productive planning would likely derive from two sources: first, innovative forms of postsecondary education occurring outside the traditional colleges and universities (i.e., research universities and selective, well-endowed private colleges), and second, “the advocacy by planners for structural and not just incremental or even strategic changes at the traditional institutions.” We would fail to ponder these seminal insights of the “old master” at great risk to the future of planning in higher education and to the academic enterprise itself.

By now it is abundantly clear that there can be no science of education planning. What might work in Thailand does not work in Toronto. What might work for an American multinational university does not work for an African college. And what might have worked in the 1960s does not work in the 1990s. There is no one way to do university planning.

Planning may have developed a few general principles, such as the need for an institution to pay attention both to its traditions and to the most consequential environmental factors pressing on it, or the necessity of knowing about competitors and competing distinctively among them. But to be successful, planning must also adapt to local, specific conditions and to the temper of the times. What this means for those of us in the quasi-profession of planning is that we must all be amateur anthropologists and historians of the present and the near-term future, as well as technicians of institutional change.

As I look at the cultural and historical shifts that affect the way we conduct planning, I see America’s 3,600 colleges and universities being assaulted by two huge changes, separated but connected. I think these two new developments require us to reconsider and reconfigure how institutions of higher education do their planning. What are these two transformations?
The first change is one that has been written and talked about for the past several years, although it is usually described in bits and pieces or with a too-heavy concentration on only one feature of the shift. It is a multifaceted profound change, one that is reshaping society as we have known it. Even the usually very cautious Alan Greenspan speculated recently that we might be witnessing what he called “a once or twice in a century” period of economic and social change.

The most prominently mentioned characteristics of this change have been the introduction of personal computers, the explosive growth in the use of the Internet, and the development of the World Wide Web. This is certainly a dynamic trio of inventions. But these new communications vehicles constitute only one part of the transformation we are living through. This is not the place to describe the full set of changes, which are numerous. For example, the birth control pill and the women’s movement have changed the relations between women and men,2 and the civil rights movement has opened the doors of opportunities to African Americans. The nuclear family is dissolving; last year one-third of all children in the United States and much of Western Europe were born out of wedlock. Jet-propelled airplanes now whisk people to far corners of the earth in hours instead of days. Medical science has stamped out most childhood diseases and helps our society have the largest, fastest growing number of people 70 to 100 years of age in history. By 1997 new developments in technology, bioscience, finance, retailing, and international trade had created 189 billionaires in the United States; and a new class structure is emerging, which has a larger number of wealthy citizens, a larger number of poor persons, and a shrinking middle class.3

Just as electricity, the steam engine, blast furnaces for steel, new cities, the discovery of oil, and the telephone transformed a mainly agricultural America in the late 19th century, so a remarkable array of technical, scientific, and social innovations is transforming U.S. society today. These are times of extraordinary upheaval, of upsetting discontinuities, and of amazing new opportunities for entrepreneurs.

Much of this change stems from two things: entrepreneurial spirit and advanced knowledge. The new billionaires, from Bill Gates to Warren Buffett, own no rich farmland, oil fields, mineral rights, or private armies (the traditional sources of wealth). Instead, their fortunes are built mainly on individual daring and on intellect. This fact brings me to the second major transformation.

The New Configuration of Higher Education

As the United States has moved into a more heavily knowledge-based society, colleges and universities have become the central institutions, as Daniel Bell and Peter Drucker predicted. They are the homes of intellect. However, in the course of responding to the profound changes of our times, and because of the move from elite to mass higher education, colleges and universities too have been rearranging themselves. There are now at least four distinct kinds.

- The most visible is the research university. There are roughly 110 to 120 of these. From the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Yale University to Stanford University and the University of Washington, these universities are becoming primarily research factories, the fecund source of new ideas, scientific data, and discoveries for society. Faculty at these institutions are hired, promoted, and honored almost entirely for their research and contributions to new knowledge. For nearly 50 percent of the undergraduate courses at these institutions, teaching is now delegated to graduate students, adjuncts, and temporary
instructors. These national research incubators, which are financed increasingly by federal and corporate grants and not tuition dollars, are becoming the ideal research universities that Daniel Coit Gilman envisioned for Johns Hopkins University in the 1880s. They are unhitching the American alliance of the undergraduate English teaching college and the graduate German research university.

A new “star system,” as former Harvard dean Henry Rosovsky calls it, “has greatly increased the power of professors and given many of them immunity from institutional control.”4 It also has enabled the gifted research professors to crush most attempts at structural reforms and to stonewall pleas to return to teaching.5 For these research-focused universities, any attempt at university-wide strategic plans, greater emphasis on student growth, or new campus architecture that facilitates a more collaborative community will meet with enormous resistance.

• Of the four kinds, the most venerated is the small liberal arts college. Here too there are roughly 110 to 120 excellent undergraduate colleges, though another several hundred colleges would probably claim to be in this group. But only 7 percent or so of all higher education students today are 18- to 22-year-olds who reside on campus and earn liberal arts degrees. Still, these small colleges are the snug, attractive “academical villages” that Thomas Jefferson envisioned. The students are very bright, often from moderately affluent families, and frequently multitalented. The teaching is among the best in the country. Competitive athletics, lots of leadership opportunities, creative academic assignments, internships, and travel and service stints develop entrepreneurial spirit and a global and historical perspective, as well as intellect. Roughly three-quarters of the graduates go on to graduate or professional schools.

Yet, like the powerful research universities, faculty members at the liberal arts colleges tend to be as intensely devoted to the aims of educating women and men who are balanced, historically aware, well-rounded leaders in society as the research universities are devoted to training specialized investigators of the new. Again, for bold strategic planners, advocates of reengineering and distance education, and those pushing for structural alterations in undergraduate learning, this sector is unlikely to be receptive to significant rearrangements. However, numerous of the less well endowed liberal arts colleges have been adding selected master’s degree programs and new specialties in women’s or African-American studies and initiating undergraduate professional business and education programs.6 • Third is the huge, polyglot array of state colleges and universities, colleges of technology, and regional private colleges. Most of these are diligently and often skillfully preparing people for the world of work as accountants, television journalists, graphic artists, nurses, and electronics experts. These institutions are mainstays for providing workers and officers for a capitalist society. At these institutions, planning is likely to be more readily received, even sought after. Because the world of work keeps changing, these colleges and universities are usually more aware that they too need to keep changing.

• The fourth kind is composed of the two-year colleges, proprietary schools, and the less well endowed private colleges, which, from necessity or religious commitments, take in more than 90 percent of their applicants, including some who are seriously underprepared or are starting college as adults. The instruction is heavily vocational and job oriented. This layer
tends to be remarkably open to planning for new forms of service, different kinds of faculty, and novel forms of academic delivery, especially if the new forms and services hold promise of bolstering enrollments and increasing revenues.

The New Demands for Planning

The combination of profound changes in society and sharper divisions among the 3,600 institutions of higher education in this country suggests that higher education planners may need to rethink their practices and modes of operation. Just as collegiate planning was heavily architectural and growth oriented in the expanding 1960s and 1970s, and was predominantly strategic and efficiency oriented in the contracting and more competitive 1980s and 1990s, so college and university planning may now need to enter a third stage. As Abraham Lincoln once said, “As our case is new, so we must think anew. We must disenthral ourselves.”

What are likely to be the ingredients of this third stage of higher education planning? I suspect the new forms will have two principal characteristics. To respond to the striking changes in society, planners may need to move beyond strategic planning to structural changes. And to accommodate to the new alignment of colleges and universities, planners will increasingly need to tailor their academic, financial, and facilities planning to whichever of the four segments of U.S. higher education they are addressing. In effect, I think higher education planning now needs to become more concerned with adaptive structural changes and with the different needs of each of the four segments of higher learning.

By structural changes I mean alterations in the basic features that we have come to regard as fixed since the 1890s: college should take four years and require 120 or so credits. Faculties should be divided into departments. Classes should be small. Faculty should have lifetime tenure and should combine teaching, research, and service to the university and the public. Colleges and universities should stand alone, as separate as small towns in rural areas. Organized sports teams should provide recreation on each campus, with recruited athletes. Education should be offered in semesters, with little or no regular instruction during June, July, and August. Professors should have a doctorate, and each student should have a major subject in which she or he concentrates. I believe we will come to see that none of these features is essential.

Finances alone will force some structural changes, as the cost of college plus graduate study at the better private institutions approaches a quarter million dollars, and leading research and professional school professors now earn $200,000 to $400,000 a year from lectures, private businesses, consultancies, and salaries. The Internet, easier travel, a swelling interest in internships and apprenticeships, on-the-job training, and the like will also compel more fundamental reforms.

In one of the most imaginative essays on the future of higher learning, John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid predict that universities could soon become “degree-granting bodies” or DGBs, giving credit for travel and study abroad, work with experts in forestry or architecture, learning on the Internet, and work in on-campus seminars.

Essentially, a student’s university career…would no longer be through a particular place, time, or preselected body of academics, but through a network principally of students’ own making, yet shaped by a DGB and its faculty. Students could stay at home or travel, mix on-line and off-line
education, work in classes or with mentors, and take their own time. Their college careers wouldn’t begin at age eighteen and end at age twenty-two.7

In my view, higher education planners will be called upon increasingly to help redesign our colleges and their structures as these structures have been configured for the past century.

The exact nature of the structural changes, however, will depend on the kind of institution for which the planning is being done. In their 1968 book, The Academic Revolution, Christopher Jencks and David Riesman prophesied that “the old special-interest colleges” will nearly all seek to emulate the more prestigious universities. “The model for the future is the university college.”8 In their view, higher education in America, at least at the four-year colleges, would gradually become more homogeneous. While there has been some pull in this direction, there has actually been a greater pull toward differentiation among institutions of U.S. higher education in the past three decades.

More than ever, the nation is using colleges and universities to accomplish different national goals, and more corporations are also using these institutions for their ends. In his prescient classic of 1963, The Uses of the University, Clark Kerr observed, “The university has been embraced and led down the garden path by its environmental suitors.”9

The research universities are increasingly factories of beneficial new knowledge with colleges and graduate and professional schools where superior, dedicated teaching is becoming vestigial. The liberal arts colleges are the primary centers for devotedly educating young undergraduates for intelligent leadership and service in business and the professions, though some colleges aspire to be mini-research factories too. The state colleges and universities, many private universities, and less affluent colleges are largely manpower training centers, turning out social workers, electrical engineers, marketing experts, agricultural specialists, toxicologists, and computer programmers for society. And many community colleges and some small, struggling private colleges are chiefly vocational and technical schools that also conduct literacy classes for immigrants and those persons who have neglected their high school studies.

Clearly there is some overlap in implementing the four different national purposes at many institutions. But planning at each of these four kinds of institutions needs to acknowledge the dominant purpose of each; the different kind of faculty members and their influence at each; and their different students, sources of funding, and connections with outside agencies. Thus, all higher education needs to be redesigned structurally but according to the new quartet of roles that colleges and universities play in contemporary life.

How Might Change Occur?

How can this be accomplished? In my experience, many colleges and universities will be reluctant to design major, structural changes from within their ranks, though some will experiment bravely.10 The templates of the future will be cut mainly by new institutions created outside the accredited colleges and universities. Buying books or stocks via the Internet was not initiated by Barnes & Noble or Merrill Lynch but by Amazon.com and Charles Schwab and E-Trade. Likewise, the DeVry Institutes, which do superb undergraduate teaching in technology and business without dormitories, sports teams, fund-raisers, or tenure and make a financial profit, or the University of Phoenix and
Britain’s Open University, which deliver advanced training to adults in numerous states and have no campuses, are showing the way for fundamental reforms.

And numerous corporations, from McDonald’s with its Hamburger University to General Electric with its college for medical technicians, are doing the same to compete innovatively with the community colleges. For example, the Harley-Davidson Motor Company has recently opened its Harley-Davidson University in Milwaukee for motorcycle mechanics and dealers nationwide, with rigorous short-term courses, model storefronts, and pool tables for after-class recreation. Incidentally, the architectural firm of Kubabla Washatko of Cedar Rapids, Wisconsin, did a creative design for the new school by converting an old warehouse into a beautiful, organized, ultramodern garage.

The third stage of academic planning will, therefore, most likely derive from two things. One is a closer study of the innovative forms of postsecondary education taking place outside the traditional colleges and universities and the gradual adoption of the best new forms. The other is increased advocacy by planners for structural and not just incremental or even strategic changes at the traditional institutions.

What needs to be questioned is the eight-month school year, long semesters, the still-growing number of entertainment activities on campus, the feudal department divisions, the four-year regimen, and much of the century-old structure of present-day higher education. But the renovations must take into consideration that each of the four sectors of higher education will require a slightly different design. Form does follow function, and the functions of U.S. colleges and universities have been multiplying, as we probably expected they would as America moved from elite higher education for the few to mass higher education for the many.

As we education planners prepare ourselves for this bolder, more fundamental set of changes in higher education, I believe it would be beneficial if we also returned to study and learn from some of the earlier figures who battled quite successfully for radical new forms to meet historical new conditions: in higher education, Frank Aydelotte, Nicholas Murray Butler, Charles William Eliot, Daniel Coit Gilman, and William Rainey Harper; and in design, people such as Frederick Law Olmsted and Charles and Ray Eames.

Notes


