Punishment for the Universities—Starvation

By Amitai Etzioni

As many universities still prepare to face last year's crisis—building up their security forces, installing iron gates—and filling away duplicates of all important documents—this year's crisis is already in full swing. The financials of many universities are in such a tight squeeze that the next Penn Center—the next declaration of tightness and hence bankruptcy, despite considerable assets—is expected to come not from a major corporation or from a national magazine, but from a private university. (State universities are in trouble, but they cannot go financially bankrupt any more than any other state agency can.)

This year several private universities are using parts of their endowments to finance their operating costs, thus reducing income, which will force them to cut deeper into their endowments, which will reduce their income even further. This downward spiral cannot continue long before a university will crash. Monticello College in Illinois reportedly will close at the end of this academic year. St. Louis University has closed its School of Dentistry and is closing its Engineering School; Harvard, Stanford and Princeton report serious financial troubles. Yale has announced a freeze on hiring of faculty for this year, while Columbia has ordered a cutback of courses and staff.

One side effect of this crisis is the gradual nationalization of the American higher education system. Over the last few years, practically all new colleges opened were state colleges (mainly two-year institutions). Cornell, Pittsburgh, and Penn State are in one way or another now dependent on their respective states for support. Long Island University, which is financed chiefly by students' fees, found many of its students turning to free "open admission" city colleges. The total result is not only a large increase in taxpayers' burden, but a considerable shrinking of academic freedom.

The differences are not dichotomous: some private universities have poorly withstood a Joe McCarthy influence, while some state universities have been and are remarkably free. However, the freedom at state universities is less safeguarded than at private institutions. Thus, recently the trustees of the University of California started "mixing-in" the tenure decisions as well as the hiring and firing of professors on political grounds. In another instance, state support for a major private eastern university was delayed until it introduced a punitive code for its rebelling students.

While some private universities will collapse, and others will be taken over by the state, the quality of all is suffering. To take my own department as an example, the financial crisis requires us to increase the size of the classrooms, to provide more lectures and fewer seminars, to increase the teaching load per professor, and to retain fewer auxiliary staff.

The present crisis has economic and political origins. Endowments of private universities consist of stocks, bonds and real estate; the income from many of these has been cut off over the last 18 months. Alumni, suffering the effects of recession, are, of course, less generous, even when they are not angry. And the citizens of many states, already heavily taxed, voted down bonds for schools and universities. Thus, for most colleges the current recession is not one of mini-proportions.

The political source of the crisis is an unholy alliance, usually unwitting, between the ultra-conservatives and the extreme left, which have been exchanging favors long before the present crisis in the universities. In recent years, unnecessary police raids and police brutality, authorized by the Reagans of the country and cheered by the hard-hats and their brethren, proved to be the best agents in mobilizing the extreme left. And senseless violence, such as the dynamiting of laboratories even PhD's and the fire-bombing of dormitories, provided those who would oppress all dissent with the needed excuses for initiating punitive legislation.

However, they have run into a hefty opposition. This country has a long tradition of due process, autonomy of the courts, and civil rights law. It historically has had a huge, politically moderate middle sector, which does not favor riots by men in blue uniforms or shooting of students any more than it believes in social change by dynamite and arson. At first, the Nixon administration did initiate the enactment of tough bills to penalize rebelling students and the campuses which "harbor" them. However, by the time the bills reached congressional hearings, the administration no longer supported them, and actually quietly urged their abandonment. And those bills which were enacted by Congress are toothless. (The same cannot be said about those passed by some state legislature.)

But, it now seems, the angry citizens and those politicians who appeal to them have found a new way to punish not just the bomb-throwers or even the demonstrators, but the universities—all their students, faculties, libraries, and research alike. They starve the universities for funds. (When the California legislature froze the faculty salaries, although all other state employees' salaries were raised, the citizens' mail ran heavily in favor of the freeze, with many asking for a punitive cut of salaries.)

Hopefully, those segments of the public now furious with the colleges will realize soon that by beating the universities they flatten the resources available to their sons and daughters and—to the nation. Maybe it is time to remind the parent generation that the universities are not only a major source of culture in this country but also the training ground for doctors, engineers, lawyers, and most other professions, and the site of much basic research vital for the treatment of our problems, from crime waves to pollution.

And, the extreme left might well wish to reconsider, if settling its accounts with the "military industrial complex" is best achieved by undermining the campus. What is at stake is no longer military research or ROTC—which are being removed from the campus—but the quality, frequently the very survival, of one of the freest institutions of this country.

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