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What Is a University?

'Quantum Jump' in Political Activity Raises Fundamental Question of Role

By WILLIAM K. STEVENS

Suddenly, in just about a week's time, national trauma has catapulted colleges and universities into an active, overriding political role that raises with new urgency the question, "What is a university?"

In the words of Prof. Kenneth Keniston of Yale University, a member of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, there has been a "quantum jump" in the level of political activity emanating from the campuses since the United States moved into Cambodia and National Guardsmen killed four students at Kent State University.

News Analysis

School after school has shut down as thousands of students converged on Washington for today's antiwar demonstrations.

At Yale, students are canvassing New Haven neighborhoods on behalf of the antiwar movement and a fair trial for Black Panthers. Political scientists there are using the resources of their departments to determine which political campaigns are critical to the antiwar movement, and are helping to place students in those campaigns.

Political Involvement

At Princeton and at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the faculties are rearranging next fall's calendar so that students and teachers can work for candidates.

For the first time, many universities begin to look in some ways as much like the highly political Japanese model as the more sedate American model.

This is leagues away from the classical view of Cardinal Newman, who in the mid-1800s expressed a liberal ideal education that greatly influenced American colleges at the outset. In this view, a university is an assembly of scholars, testing and sharing ideas, creating a general intellectual atmosphere in which undergraduates — whatever their specific fields — can develop sound and creative habits of mind.

Over the years, other functions were added in American universities, two of the main ones being the fulfillment of society's need for professionals and technicians and the provision of expertise to government.

Judging by conversations

with some leading educators, the question of whether the university's newly magnified role as a political staging ground can coexist with the older roles promises to become one of the central issues in higher education during the months ahead.

Many neoclassicists still hold to Cardinal Newman's ideal. At the opposite end of the scale are the New Left radicals who see the university as a base from which to launch their revolution.

A more moderate school of thought, represented by Yale's President, Kingman Brewster Jr. holds that the university cannot remain neutral in the face of compelling social issues. Thus, Mr. Brewster is expected to ask the Yale Corporation today to ratify his decision to allow use of Yale's faculty and resources in helping to assure a fair trial for the Black Panthers in New Haven.

"This really marks a possible change in the definition of a university's relationship to a society, and a change in what the institution itself does," says Mr. Keniston.

Another view is represented by Christopher Jencks and David Reisman, co-authors of "The Academic Revolution," a widely hailed 1968 examination of higher education.

Mr. Jencks believes that a university is well suited to political action over the short term, because it can provide a vast number of recruits with the necessary time and independence. But over the long term, Mr. Jencks believes, the university is "simply not a well-fortified political base from which to launch an attack on the status quo," because in time it becomes vulnerable to reprisal by those who supply it money.

Students and faculty should be encouraged to take political action as individuals, Mr. Riesman says, but the university itself should not sponsor such action or give students time off for it.

"Even more than before, they are turning the universities into political forums in which the serious and the skeptical have very little chance," he says. "There's a temptation to burn the seed corn when the famine is going to last a long time. And the universities are very

significant seed corn."

In Professor Riesman's view, universities should maintain "a strategic role" in regard to politics—observing all of society's problems, promoting balance, preserving and developing the intellectual resources from which rational and creative attacks on social and political ills can grow.

In the end, some feel, the character of the universities is likely to be shaped by events. "I just think the universities are up for grabs right now," says the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, president of the University of Notre Dame. "There is no great, overwhelming wisdom coming out of anywhere right now as to where we're going.

"I think we're at some kind of a watershed in American history," Father Hesburgh said. "Until we can somehow get this generation convinced that the system can work, we cannot get back to education as we have known it. The university's proper role in this? I don't know. Everybody's living on adrenalin these days."

Reply on Cambodia on ABC

Lawrence F. O'Brien, Chairman of the Democratic National Committee, requested equal time from the three television networks to reply to President Nixon on United States policy in Indochina. The Columbia Broadcasting System and the National Broadcasting Company refused his request. The American Broadcasting Company granted his request and will cover live his Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner address in Milwaukee tonight at 10:30 P.M.