National Higher Education Policy
Commissions in the Post-World War II Era:
Issues of Representation

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The issue of who calls for change and the nature of that change are important ones for United States higher education. A number of higher education scholars have addressed issues of change at colleges and universities, often examining the limits of change. Recently Tierney argued in Building Communities of Difference (1993) that scholars’ sense of what is normal, i.e. norms, has been instrumental in constraining how we think about the organization and governance of higher education. In great part, Tierney argues, that sense of normal has developed as the result of who has been able to participate in higher education and in the debates about higher education. Other scholars have taken an opposite view. Bloom (1989) suggests that because higher education has further incorporated different views and peoples, it has lost its critical center and thus failed the nation.

These arguments lead to an important question: who has said what about change in United States higher education? More important, who has made national statements about higher education in this country, and what have they said? An examination of national higher education policy commissions reveals a great deal about the dominant discussion in higher education. These are the groups by which, presumably, experts in
higher education (based on their education, experience, or both) speak to the nation as well as higher education about problems and opportunities for reform. Identifying the commission members establishes an important component of understanding higher education policy. As Slaughter (1990) notes, the composition of a policy commission has a substantial impact on the nature of commission reports. Yet much of the research regarding policy (Finifter, Baldwin, and Thelin, 1991; Hanes, 1988), much less national policy commissions, focuses less on the identity of the participants and more on the efficacy of the reports. Thus, while the nature of the reports has been an issue for analysis, that issue has constituted only one characteristic. In essence, in response to such research, this study expands such research by asking: efficacy by whom and for whom? Cinnamond (1987) notes the metaphorical characteristics of several policy reports; this examination reveals themes in regard to gender, ethnicity, and institutional representation.

The period immediately following World War II evidenced a substantial growth in two areas of United States higher education, access and research. Both areas had already received a great deal of attention, but in the late 1940s and early 1950s the country saw itself as ready to move ahead, having conquered the Axis powers and apparently preserving the ideals of democracy. Much of this perspective is evident in the 1947 report of the President's Commission on Higher Education and in
Vannevar Bush's report to President Roosevelt, *Science, The Endless Frontier*. In view of those statements, this study begins with national higher education policy commission reports of the late 1940s and concludes with the most recent of such works. The time period examined is one of remarkable growth, retrenchment, and multiple attempts at re-definition, offering a fascinating context for the study of national policy statements.

This study examined these national commissions in terms of both their members and their reports. The inquiry incorporates two research methods, an empirical investigation of the composition of the commissions and a textual analysis—examining texts for recurrent themes—of the commission reports.

The study attempts to examine all national higher education policy commissions, according to specific criteria, in the post-World War II era. The researchers chose to exclude associations' commissions whose membership was essentially composed of any individual association's members because the focus of study is not on what associations produce what information but rather the results of inter-association and agency (i.e., national) efforts. Nor does this examination include contracted reports and studies, still consistent with the perspective that national efforts should reveal broader issues. These excluded commissions and reports, as well as national conferences (especially sponsored rather than annual ones) and their participants are all important
points of further research. The decision to examine only reports written for the most part by commission members resulted in some odd alignments. For example, the National Board on Graduate Education report on minority students was not part of the analysis because the preface of the report noted that a staff member had essentially written the report (National Board on Graduate Education, 1976). In contrast, the final report of the Board was part of the analysis because its preface indicated that the Board itself had composed much of the statement (National Board on Graduate Education, 1975). While the difference appears to be small, the point of this study was to examine how a body of experts would discuss change in United States higher education. The seemingly national representation in the included reports provides a critical perspective for understanding arguments regarding change and reform in United States higher education.

The researchers encountered a surprising number of difficulties in identifying such commissions, ranging from simply finding them to, more problematically, identifying members and securing the actual reports. To some extent this is not surprising, given that higher education in this country is not a national system. Nevertheless, other than such well-known commissions as the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, it proved quite difficult to ascertain higher education policy
commissions.' The authors of this study were able to identify fourteen such national higher education policy commissions in the period examined. The composition and texts of their reports revealed some important characteristics about calls for change in higher education.

Representation on Policy Commissions

As an empirical examination, the conceptual basis for the research derives from the model of power proposed by Steven Lukes. Other higher education scholars have based their analyses of power on Lukes' work (Brint and Karabel, 1989), suggesting that his model of three faces of power demonstrates specific and substantial characteristics of higher education. Lukes argues that previous scholarly formulations of power ignored a significant component, the absence of constituencies and issues from a decision-making agenda. For example, in the area of national policy statements on education, the National Opinion Research Center (1979) developed a pluralistic approach to study policy issues, identifying the parties interested in such issues as a means for furthering the dissemination of information to

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1The researchers used a variety of methods to find policy commissions. These methods were title and subject searches in library catalogues, a review of the Educational Record from 1946 to the present, title and subject searches in ERIC from 1966 to the present and in the Education Index from 1946 to the present as well as examinations of biographies of national figures (such as Ernest Boyer, Robben Fleming, and Clark Kerr).
relevant groups. Yet an empirical investigation based on Lukes' formulation of power and decision-making offers a precise statement not only of the representation on national policy commissions but also as an evaluation of participation and non-participation in national policy recommendations.

Initially this study began as a consideration of G. William Domhoff's model of social stratification and dominance (Domhoff, 1970). In Domhoff's analysis, "members of the upper class sit in pivotal government offices, define most major policy issues, shape the policy proposals on issues raised outside their circles, and mold the rules of government" (Domhoff, 1970; pp. 105-106). Domhoff extends his analysis to dominance of the intelligentsia and cites the Asia Foundation as an example of how members of the upper class interlock in molding policy issues (Domhoff, 1970; pp. 271-273).

The authors of this investigation extended Domhoff's model to higher education based on influential individuals (in contemporary terms, people such as Ernest Boyer and Clark Kerr) and their gender, ethnicity, and institutional affiliation. The study's initial hypothesis was that even over the several decades studied, a number of the same individuals would serve on multiple commissions. Consequently the reports would reflect a degree of similarity representative of those individuals and the types of institutions that employed them.
That specific hypothesis did not, however, sustain in the analysis of the data. In one sense, commissions tended to have a wide range of individuals serving rather than a specific set of interlocking directorates. Yet in a more general sense, the findings from this study reflects the Domhoff model. Although the number of individuals was substantial, the background of those individuals in terms of gender, ethnicity, and institutional representation was remarkably limited. Even though we had expected that white males at elite institutions would dominate the commissions, we had not anticipated the extraordinary degree of domination. The following results provide a general overview of the findings of the study.

In terms of gender, the composition of these commissions was 89 percent male and 11 percent female. This level of domination remained fairly constant over time, with only a slight shift toward participation among women in the later years of the study.

In terms of ethnicity, the composition is even more startling. Only 2 percent of the commission members were people of color.

Finally, the examination of the institutional type represented on national commissions revealed an unexpected representation. Twenty-three percent of the individuals were from research universities or highly selective liberal arts colleges, not especially surprising in view of the visibility and positioning of such institutions. Yet the next largest
representation came from state and federal elected officials--14 percent of the members were politicians. Representation of elected officials would be an obvious choice for a national policy commission because politicians see themselves as creators of public policy (Finifter, Baldwin, and Thelin, 1991, pp. 37-38), and there were several federal commissions in the study. Nevertheless, the finding that such representation was greater than all but two categories of colleges and universities was unanticipated. As for other types of institutions, the range of institutional representation was clearly limited. The number of members from women's colleges was under five percent. Representation from four-year public colleges and community colleges was minimal, at one percent each. The representation of historically Black colleges and universities was also distinctly small, at one percent.

Finally, the researchers were curious as to how women and people of color were located on these national policy commissions. In view of the small number of people of color on policy commissions, there was no opportunity for general conclusions. As concerns women, however, there was a consistent tendency for them to serve on commissions addressing such issues as the humanities or student life (Commission on the Humanities, 1980; Committee on the Student in Higher Education, 1968) and to have little or no representation on commissions addressing such
as issues as the sciences or graduate education (Financing and Managing University Research Equipment, 1985; National Board on Graduate Education, 1975; National Commission on Student Financial Assistance, 1983). The process of marginalization in the development of national higher education policy is substantial, and given the few changes over time, still enduring.

**Textual Analysis of Policy Commission Reports**

The empirical analysis of representation is of course only counting. The process of understanding how representation occurs in such as areas as national policy commissions obtains further clarity with the use of methods such as textual analysis. This method complements the empirical investigation by providing a specification of the topics addressed by national policy commissions as well as those not addressed by such commissions. Textual analysis offers a narrative explication of the policy commission reports.

The following examination focuses on five reports as reflective of the fourteen the investigators reviewed. Two of the five are major policy commission reports, the 1947 President's Commission on Higher Education, often called the Truman Commission and the Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education (which as a commission issued statements in addition to contracting for many reports by individual or
collaborating authors). The other three commissions--one from 1952, one from 1968, and one from 1980--provide a number of contrasts to some of the themes of the Truman and Carnegie Commissions and are more representative of the other commission reports examined in this study. Each of the three reports has a different topic, and although there is some difference among them in terms of a picture of higher education, there are also some important consistencies which obtain for all of the reports studied.

All of the commission reports demonstrate a number of values that are historically consistent and directly representative of the interests of the individuals serving on the commissions. For example, a sense of community and connectedness is valued within colleges and universities. This includes such variables as an integrated curriculum and a collaborative professoriate. In addition, support for educators is considered vital in higher education policy reports. For some commission, this support is fiscal, while in others it involves time for reflection and professional renewal.

Both the Truman Commission and Carnegie Council reports specifically address the nature of community in United States higher education, urging colleges and universitas as well as the federal government to expand the community. Yet each provides limits to the expansion. In the case of the Truman Commission, it suggests that "at least 49 percent of our population has the
mental ability to complete at least 14 years of schooling ... 
[and] at least 32 percent of our population has the mental 
ability to complete an advanced liberal or specialized 
professional education" (1947, p. 41). The Carnegie Council 
suggests a more subtle limit, arguing for equal opportunity 

While the Truman Commission and the Carnegie Council 
suggested expansion of higher education, there has been only 
occasional support of such expansion from other commissions. 
Some images that emerge from the analysis of policy commission 
reports portray higher education as a restricted community. The 
commission reports examined were written almost exclusively by 
white males. This over-representation of a portion of the 
population had an impact on the reports' contents. The relative 
homogeneity of the individuals involved in the commissions led 
not only to issues of representation, but also to problems with 
misrepresentation regarding suggested policies. Any topic that 
was not consistent with white, middle class, male culture was 
often minimized, if not conspicuously absent, and textual 
misrepresentation went beyond masculine referents. Elitism 
emerged in the reports when the learned were distinguished from 
the unlearned within society, and women and people of color were 
rarely included among the learned. Often the over-representation 
of white male middle-class culture took the form of dichotomies 
within the report narrative. For example, Western cultural
heritage was counterpoised with non-Western culture, and cultural studies was acknowledged only in the sense of the study of foreign languages. In addition, omissions within the reports often led to a simplistic view of the complexity of higher education and issues of representation.

In regard to elitism, reports consistently portrayed higher education as the initiator of civic virtue; even more specifically, the Commission on Humanities (1980) argued that the humanities lead to heightened civic participation by emphasizing a common humanity. Commission members (1980, p. 69) contended that the humanities extend individuals' capacities beyond mere functional literacy and basic skills to encompass critical judgement, enabling citizens to address civic issues from an informed perspective. Thus the Commission offered the implicit argument that only colleges and universities are really capable of imparting such knowledge.

Commission reports also tend to identify higher education as being the conscience for our technologically advancing society. Throughout the report of the Commission on the Humanities, members point out that in the study of humanities, fundamental social and ethical questions emerge regarding science and technology. They suggest that society can better address issues such as genetic engineering if it filters the issue through a humanistic screen. Humanists should learn about technology so that they can "employ it, describe its limitations, manage its
uses, and ultimately guide its course" (p. 97). Throughout this report, higher education has the role of moral gatekeeper in a society which is in the process of scientific and technological transformation. The Commission offers scant attention, however, to the possibility that non-Western cultures might also inform issues of science and technology.

Another report characterizes higher education's responsibility as moral gatekeeper in terms of the student, especially the student's personality. According to the Committee on the Student in Higher Education (1968), "the college is a major influence on the development of the student's personality and must therefore assume responsibility for the quality and direction of the development" (p. 33). The commission accords little if any importance to the family and the schools, two social groupings which had the opportunity to affect personality well before college entrance. Both the humanities and student commissions place higher education in a dominant role, offering little if any appreciation for the important effects of other social groups and organizations.

According to the Commission on Financing Higher Education (1952), colleges and universities make important contributions to the welfare of our society by educating men to provide essential services and effective leadership. The report states, "Higher education greatly enlarges the freedom of the individual to decide how he will lead his life. As a result, higher education
promotes a fluid and dynamic society" (1952, p. 46). Yet this same report offers no discussion of fluid and dynamic opportunities for women or minorities. Nor is this simply a historical condition, that is, an exclusion common to the time. The exploratory committee for this commission began when the Truman Commission was releasing its report, and the exploratory committee included the president of the Social Sciences Research Council, which had specifically assisted the Truman Commission in its report (Nature and Needs of Higher Education, p. vii, Higher Education for American Democracy, 1947, "Acknowledgments"). The Commission on Financing Higher Education even cites the Truman Commission (p. 47). Yet the financing commission members make no mention of Blacks in their discussion of enrollments as opposed to the careful discussion of Blacks in the Truman Commission report, and they highlight Iowa and Utah (predominantly white states) as states with especially high college attendance rates (p. 50).

Not only were certain populations the subject of discrimination, they were also the victims of misrepresentation. For example, universities were attributed with achieving a classless society which had overcome discrimination. One report argued that colleges and universities were "the least discriminatory institutions of American society in so far as race, religion, and nationality are concerned" (The Nature and
Needs of Higher Education, 1952, p. 46). The authors of the report therefore concluded that everyone could profit from higher education despite also arguing, "By its very nature higher education cannot be universal" (p. 41), offering specific justification for exclusion. The report on the student in higher education suggests, however, that the college or university is not the great equalizer, arguing that exclusionary practices exist within higher education. Nevertheless, Commission members contended that exclusion emerged in academic standards, depicting the situation as:

The usual practice of academic upgrading assumes, but rarely states, that only a certain percentage of high school graduates are capable of further education, at least in the respectable colleges and universities (Committee on the Student in Higher Education, p. 29).

The commission limits its view of exclusion within higher education to that of academic rigor without an express statement of the impact of exclusionary practices on women and people of color. Regardless of the fervency and frequency of the claims regarding higher education as a means for anyone to advance or even in the instance of acknowledged exclusion, the absence of specific advocacy for women and people of color in many of the reports reveals a much clearer, although far more distressing, view of higher education policy recommendations.

In general, commissions misrepresent the issue of diversity. Examinations of "minority" populations ignore characteristics
such as gender and ethnicity, concentrating instead on economic position, intellectual ability, or geographic representation (Commission on the Financing of Higher Education, pp. 45-49). Or, commissions concern their analyses with the destructive nature of differences. The humanities commission laments the decline of a single cultural tradition due to such challenges as the G.I. Bill, civil rights reform, affirmative action, and community colleges (Commission on the Humanities, p. 65). The Truman Commission and the Carnegie Council represent exceptions to the misrepresentation of diversity, within the limits previously noted.

One consistent conception of these reports was the need for higher education to act efficiently in meeting the needs of the polity, the economy, and the society. The goal of efficiency was often discussed in business terms. According to the Commission on Financing Higher Education, the university is "free enterprise at its best" (1952, p. 35). Other scholars have examined business relationships with higher education at the national level (Veblen, 1918; Slaughter, 1990); the findings of this investigation advance their conclusions that higher education anticipates corporate influence by adopting corporate language and goals.

In one form, the goal of efficiency appears to be deeply related to the organizational form that Max Weber discussed as central to capitalist efficiency, the bureaucracy (Weber, 1947;
pp. 328-341). Under the bureaucratic form, organizations de-emphasize individual or differing experiences and emphasize "both technical knowledge and knowledge of the concrete fact (Weber, 1947, p. 339). The measurement of women and minorities, without regard to their experiences, dominated whatever discussion of those groups actually occurred in these commission reports.² For example, the Special Task Force (1971), which produced what is known as the Newman report, and the National Commission on Student Financial Assistance (1983) both emphasized problems which women and people of color faced but expressed the problems and solutions in numerical terms. The Truman Commission and the Carnegie Council also expressed such issues in quantitative terms. Such efficiency, necessary for realizing adequate returns on investment, does not however change the experience of groups.

Although reports such as the Truman Commission and the Carnegie Commission reveal some understanding of the complex relationships between higher education and other groups in this country as well as the need to address issues of representation, national higher education policy commissions generally portray colleges and universities as special guardians of the country, arguing for inclusive characteristics while expressing exclusive ones, and necessarily corporate in their actions.

²The authors are deeply aware that their own counting ironically represents a similar form of efficiency, and hope that the complementary textual analysis offers an antidote to the irony.
Conclusion

It is not surprising that national higher education policy commission reports typically place colleges and universities at the center of the nation. The prefaces to the reports often indicated that the commission members had the charge to define higher education's important role in regard to this or that component of the society. Furthermore, higher education has increasingly welcomed the role of providing access to success (Levine, 1986). Nevertheless, the exclusionary language in terms of those without a higher education, without "talent," or as simple reference to white males, locates educated expertise without regard to a far more diverse society.

The opportunities for further research are substantial. for example, it is not at all clear whether state reports are, either over time or more recently, as clearly exclusionary as national reports. And, questions about similar representation and language seem to arise in the examination of association commissions, contracted reports, and sponsored conferences. In review of the Educational Record, it became clear that the American Council on Education indeed had commissions (or committees) on gender and ethnicity issues. Yet those

\footnote{One interesting result of the search for commissions is that the period from 1946 to the early 1980s produced several national commissions; since then, commissions have been either at the state level or the product of individual associations. This shift suggests a process of fragmentation, raising the questions of convergence and divergence (Van de Graaf and others, 1978).}
commissions typically had mostly women or people of color on them, effectively placing them on the margin by assuming that their roles in policy making focused on "their" issues.

The barely incremental changes in representation in empirical and textual terms offer a compelling critique of national higher education policy recommendations in the post-World War II era. The incremental changes also reveal the insubstantial changes in terms of representation in United States higher education. Who has called for change remains, in terms of national higher education policy commissions, the domain of a restricted community.
References


References: Commission Reports


