

Some Important Observations

The History of Stony Brook

What are the reasons, conditions or causes that contributed to the rapid development of Stony Brook as a comprehensive major university? One could point to a variety of factors, perhaps all as necessary conditions for that development, such as:

1. Starting *de novo* -- not having to undo an inherited base.
2. Getting financial support.
3. Recognizing the need for a major research university center.
4. Need for public higher education reaching into the northeast.
5. Need for increasing opportunities for new citizens for higher education.
6. Need for health care services.
7. Research and attracting those getting support from federal agencies.
8. Adopting the virtues of a public education institution's commitment to pluralistic forces and democratic values.

Yet one can argue that some or all of these conditions would not necessarily have led to the emergence of an institution with commitment to excellence and its ability to exhibit such commitment and achievement in fairly early terms. Unless other elements and characteristics were present to act not merely as a catalyst but as sufficient conditions for such development.

The sufficient conditions emerged as a major characteristic for Stony Brook, particularly as it grew out of a hostile, uncertain condition, conflict-ridden environment

and where resistance and ambiguity prevailed (even to this date) from sources throughout state government, etc., and with negative press, hostile neighbors, the political football of the County police and District Attorney's office, the hostility from medical practitioners in the area and the skeptical public at large, not to mention that all of this occurred during one of the nation's most serious crises when universities throughout the land and their missions and activities were under attack from both within and without the university community. In addition at a time when institutions, particularly public ones had to respond to redress the past egregiousness of public universities confronting equal opportunity extended to minorities where the issues of racism, sexism came to the foreground and the attention of university communities were challenging the basic assumption that guide university policy. Curricula structures, and values were under question and siege. With the colleges and universities on the front lines or among the first areas of American society to experience equal opportunity to all student populations incorporating sex, age, religion, race, ethnicity, it is not at all surprising that challenges will be leveled as what is regarded as the remnants of traditional educational patterns essentially designed for different student classes with a limited range of diversity. This may well be one of the byproducts of the radical impact of the GI Bill and the challenging of the older established ground rules and policies among colleges and universities in the country. If so, this may prove to be, as with all radical changes, a mixed blessing, but on balance a healthy reassurance of the open query debate and intensity of the arguments to open new avenues of intellectual exploration in the universities curricular programs and

their objectives. It may well be the case that as a result American universities will be assured of intellectual exchange of ideas as they develop in this era. It is not surprising therefore that figures such as Conant and Hutchins became naysayers to the radical changes implicit in the GI Bill and in the creation of newer public universities with the expansion and extension of higher education to even larger numbers of people. The world of fixed forms will be disturbed for such persons and an undermining of the fixed modes of pedagogy designed for a more serene fixed universe. In effect, these resonances are essentially antithetical to the changing configurations and challenges within a democratic society such as our own. In effect, we were to see emerging full blown in the sixties challenges to the basic assumptions that has guided educational policy, curricular structures and values, whether related to the meaning to general education, liberal education, pre-professional and professional education and the relevance of what was studied in the curriculum. All of these were to undergo serious questioning as well as scrutiny of what was being taught, how it was being taught, and direct confrontation with faculty and their successes and failures as teachers. This represented the loss of the mystique of the ivory tower.

In other words, given all these conditions of challenge, confrontation, and criticism as well as uncertainty in terms of support from various quarter of society, how were these issues overcome? Perhaps in a serious way it developed successfully because of, not in spite of these frictions and confrontations. And whenever any administration or faculty, etc., retreated from the face to face confrontation with harsh realities and tried to seek

known controversial “peace” and stability, the university suffered subsequently. The power in Albany and the press or public always wanted to be assured of such peace or harmony. But the university could not afford such a luxury, and when an active administration and serious minded faculty recognized this fact, the university prospered.

So we can cite that the failures implicit in the Olsen-Austill view of education lay in their concern of facing pluralistic view of education and new challenges to the ways of educating people with the belief that they had found a key in some kind historic intellect the reason and truth discernible in some ahistoric and asocial context: a kind of purity of focus brought into reality. As a result they had to fire Bowen, Chill and Fleisher and they had to see that Lee was removed since his very words and organizational reconfiguration of the college was more consistent with the structure of the university and the with Heald Commission Report. By the very power and ability of numbers of faculty at Oyster Bay --to a large extent thanks to the members of the sciences -- contrary views and needs to pluralize the workings of the university appeared. And the interregnum most importantly retained a power base not in any ideological group or single-minded structure for education. Rather the chairs in the various departments really determined to find a permanent leadership wholly committed to a major pluralistic and comprehensive university. The interim leadership represented by Hartzell proved to be salutary to these ends because Hartzell by temperament and inclination believed and practiced *laissez faire* and was suspicious of agencies and powers working against individual interests.

An important reason for the success of Toll's tenure with respect to what he accomplished on behalf of the university lies in the people he surrounded himself with. Ultimately, his "Cabinet" came to consist of persons like Pond, Weisinger, Glass, Gelber, Pellegrino, Oaks -- a more diverse group of individuals would be hard to find. And Cabinet meetings were as a result hardly the words of yes-men or sycophants. Toll actually encouraged and thrived in the environment of diversity of views in spite of his holding rather strong views of his own. Yet he could be convinced of a point of view or position or issue after persuasive and extensive arguments by those eager to get him to change his mind. It could be said that the sense that emerged was Toll's constant conviction that the university, in spite of any or all of its accomplishments, could not afford the luxury of complacency or self-congratulation. In fact, the pressure on faculty in departments was enormous. They were required to match their accomplishments and personnel decisions with those in clearly established institutions and well recognized distinguished faculty of great achievement. "Brilliant" was often his term for such characterization. He saw chairmen of departments as ultimately the agents for assuring excellence among the faculty of departments. He would frequently address chairmen as the "most important front line" persons in the university. It was no accident that those departments with the most energetic and determined chairmen committed to enhancing a department's status also became the best departments in the university. This emphasis upon entrepreneurial energy transcend recognizing and rewarding it appropriately --

opened the direction to new ideas, challenging opportunities and exciting appointments -- cf. Simons, Yang, Coser, Rosen, Buchler, etc.

Because criticism, confrontation and skepticism prevailed extensively on so many fronts throughout the university, it also enabled those institutions or parts of universities to force new policies, new ideas and new programs, new types of Ph. D. programs and graduate programs -- e. g. MSRC Intercoastal Oceanography, Neurobiology, the unique structure of the music department's offerings, earth and space sciences, etc. And in this context the 1968 Three Days Moratorium and the 1973 Self-Study for Middle States offered open self-critique straight and undiluted. The latter study exposed the two Stony Brook's confronted with mismatched expectations. This in turn led to Pat Hill's Federated Learning Communities concept and practice and the gaining of a major federal grant. It came to represent ultimately a decade of influencing new directions of undergraduate education at Stony Brook and elsewhere. It became a kind of overall curricular response to criticism and shortcomings in curricular development in the fifties and sixties by stressing the interconnectiveness of studies in the multiple perspectives of understanding any issue or topic.