

Higher Education as a Field of Study And its Challenges

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Abstract: *Higher education as a field of study consist of sophisticated knowledge about research on colleges, universities, and related postsecondary institutions, as well as the professional skills used by those persons who work in them. The field is meant to encourage the creation of graduate research universities that can go beyond the current German and American models as well as to assist others in becoming administrators, high school teachers, specialists in higher education and training future leaders in the field of education. The work focus on the historical background and purpose of creating higher education as a field of study, the contemporary development of higher education as a field of study, key issues facing the study of higher education, and recommendations.*

I. Introduction

The question I seek to answer in this work is can it be said that higher education is a field of study? Absolutely there is no any scholarly disagreement on any ground that higher education is not a field of study. The truth is that some see it still in its development stage struggling to find its balance between scholarships that meets the intellectual test of rigor and theoretical based research. I am in the opinion that higher education is a field of study and I will present my argument base on the literature reviews of scholars regarding the development of higher education. In the course of my work I will present the historical background and purpose of creating higher education as a field of study, the contemporary development of higher education as a field of study, key issues facing the study of higher education, and finally suggest recommendations that can help to improve the development of the field.

Higher education as a field of study consist of sophisticated knowledge about and research on colleges, universities, and related postsecondary institutions, as well as the professional skills used by those persons who work in them. It started about hundred years ago in the United States and now it has over 150 doctoral and master's degree programs in the United States that educate and train professionals for administrative, faculty, student life, and policy analyst position in the country's approximately 4,500 postsecondary institutions. The study of higher education became more formal with the rise of the public and private schools in the nineteen century: teacher needed greater preparation to teach children and the courses became more specialized. Today, the program has expanded to incorporate other professional and programmatic emphases such as student affairs, community colleges, public policy, and comparative higher education. How did the program and study of higher education start as a field of study in the United States?

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Granville Stanley Hall is known as the founder and initiator of higher education as a field of study in America. In 1893, Granville Stanley Hall, during his presidency at Clark University, began the first formal courses in the study of higher education. His desire was to reform colleges and universities through promotion of the study of higher education and he puts effort to professionalize administrative work and create higher education faculty. James J. F. Forest and Kevin Kinser (2002) said that the inspiration of Hall's desire for the course came from several sources but he was particularly attracted to the higher education research of German educators and historians and felt that United States colleges and universities needed to be reformed through the adoption of that of the German universities. He advocated this field of study through more than sixty publications on higher education which are mainly research journals (Pedagogical Seminary in 1891) meant to focus on administration (Forest and Kinser, 2002, P. 306). Growing specialization in this field led to some twenty seven formal higher education degree programs by 1945 (Ewing and Stickler, 1964). Lester F. Goodchild (1991) commented on G. Stanley Hall's effort to broaden higher education:

Granville Stanley Hall (1844-1924) included the study of higher education as part of his broader commitment to developing the discipline of psychology in this country. For him, one aspect of applied psychology was education. Hall explored all levels of education during his academic and administrative career. As one of the first professors of education in the United States, at John's Hopkins University in 1844 (Ross, 1972, pp. 132-133), he developed a strong interest in the study of higher education, which became a lifelong avocation (Goodchild, 1991, P.16).

Hall's purpose of promoting education as a field of study was to encourage the creation of graduate research universities that can go beyond the current German and American models as well as to assist others in becoming administrators (Hall, 1899, p. 56), high school teachers, specialists in higher education (Hall, 1914, p. 24), and training future leaders in the field of education (Hall, 1891, p. 312). Hall pleaded and universities responded and allowed course on higher education to emerge from the thicket of elementary and secondary programs. Universities that started this program are Ohio State University (1918), Teachers College at Columbia University (1920), University of Chicago (1921), University of Pittsburgh (1928), University of California at Berkeley (1929), and University of Michigan (1929). These Universities developed educational programs in their institutions as they become more specialize which in turn gave rise to greater number of professional administrators and faculty. These universities curricula were shaped by the practical needs of administrators and faculty. Courses in higher education were gradually produced out of the secondary education concentrations and as collegiate enrollment expanded between the wars, this professional objective broadened to include student personnel and institutional research. As these programs evolved between 1893 and 1960, curricular patterns and their related philosophies became clearer. Applied research was used to create curricula and educators used theoretical principles to structure their curricular offerings (Katz (1966). For example Hall employed psychological principles to structure Clark University's curricular offerings in higher education and Tyler achieved social science approach to the study of education at the university of Chicago in the 1940s and thereafter. From 1893 to 1960, the study of higher education evolved from apprenticeship method to a professional field of study. The need to train professionals for bureaucratic tasks and for institutional leadership increased with the expansion of administration of administrative positions in American higher institutions (Goodchild, 1991, Pp.18-30). In 1919 associations such as National Association of Student Personnel Administrator (NASPA) and American College Personnel Association (ACPA) were developed to enable administrators to meet and discuss their mutual interest and concerns.

Two national leaders and their works further advanced higher education as a field of study. Leonard V. Koos's *The Junior College* (1924) and *The Junior College Movement* (1925) ignited the field with new research on the United States two-year college. The second work is that of Esther Lloyd-Jones's *Student Personnel Work at Northwestern University* (1929) and *A Student Personnel Program for Higher Education* (1938, with Margaret R. Smith), which enabled other educators to specialize the content in programs for men and women deans of students and student personnel counselors. During the 1950s, higher education faculty embraced a new direction in their teaching and research and funds of approximately \$500,000 were given to hire research oriented faculty and conduct research and provide students with more scholarship. This era of expansion led to the creation of more than one hundred higher education programs by the end of 1960 at various research-oriented universities (Forest and Kinser, 2002, P. 307).

III. Contemporary Development of Higher Education as Field of Study

Since the early 1970s, the field of higher education has continued to develop. Higher education as a field of study emerged from growing specialization of pedagogical knowledge and increasing demand by society for professional practice from its educators. During this period, some of these programs specialized in areas of college and university administration meant to educate and train future university, college, and community college administrators, student affairs professionals, and academic researchers. The study of higher education has evolved into a field of study rather than science or discipline and a growing interest in the relatively new area of comparative higher education has developed within these higher education programs (Paul L. Dressel and Lewis B. Mayhew, 1974 and Forest and Kinser, 2002, P. 308). In 1985, there was a great improvement in higher education in the field of research when John C. Smart began his *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, to help administrators to know more easily the depth and complexity of the field. Today, higher education as a field of study offers an increasing wealth of contributions toward addressing the critical issues of our world.

Higher education as a field of study derives its identity and character from the master's (both M.A. and M.Ed.) and doctoral (both Ph.D and Ed.D) degrees programs across the country. The doctoral program usually includes studies in a about higher education generally, studies in particular concentration, and the development of appropriate quantitative and quality research skills while the master's program, focus on higher education administration or student affairs, and pay much less attention to developing research skills. Much research in the field is conducted on postsecondary constituencies, issues, and problems.

IV. Key Issues Facing the Study of Higher Education

Higher education as a field of study has long struggled with questions regarding its role and standing within the overall academic community (John Melendez (2002). There is no any disagreement that higher education is not a field of study rather; it is seen by some as still in its adolescence stage (Peterson, 1986), striving to find a balance between scholarship that meets the intellectual test of rigor and theoretical based

research. Higher education as a field of study has also struggled with questions regarding its legitimacy. The applied nature of the field, along with its historical development as a multidisciplinary field of study has often resulted in questions centering on the role of theory and practice. In recent years the many of the articles and essays produce by scholars such as Marvin Peterson, Philip Altbach, Andrienne Kezar called for higher education research to influence and guide the practice (Melendez, 2002, P. 5).

However, the persistent problem over the decades within the study of higher education is the lack of consensus on a guiding knowledge base and theoretical framework. The works of Weidman, Nelson, and Radzynski (1984) present this consistent problem of inconsistency of a knowledge base on the field of higher education. Study was subsequently undertaken to examine expectations of reading materials through the revisiting of Weidman, Nelson, and Radzynski's work at the University of Pittsburgh in the early 1980's. The field of higher education draws upon a wide selection of theoretical frameworks and constructs. One of the foremost difficulties in embracing and developing consensus on a knowledge base for higher education has been the disparity of thought over what is and should be a required basic understanding of the field (Dresel & Mayhew, 1974; Cooper, 1980).

Another issue is the development of criteria for identifying outstanding graduate programs in the field which has met with some difficulty (Keirn, 1983). A very real need exists to clarify what the higher education community expects from graduate students. Additionally, current changes underway in higher education administration and systems provide a solid rationale to examine if what is being prescribed for students has changed from Weidman, Nelson, and Radzynski's work at the University of Pittsburgh over a decade ago. In response to the challenge of identifying and building a knowledge base, several scholars have turned to the understanding of books believed to be basic reading within the field of higher education (Bender & Riegel, 1973; Drew & Schuster, 1980; Weidman, Nelson, & Radzynski, 1984). In each of these research efforts, scores of reading materials were identified, but little consensus was developed. Only two books were common in all three investigations: Cardinal Newman's *The Idea of a University: Defined and illustrated* and Christopher Jencks and David Riesman's *Academic Revolution*. To assist scholars and practitioners within this frame of reference, there exists a real need to determine what is expected from higher education preparation programs (Miller & Nelson, 1994, P.50).

In finding solution toward these problems a survey instrument was developed in spring and summer of 1992 to be consistent with the earlier attempts to identify books considered basic to the study of higher education. Bender and Riegel's original classification of faculty areas of primary specialization were included on the survey instrument, including: history of higher education; higher education sociology and change; administration and organization; curriculum and instruction; research, planning, assessment, and evaluation; student personnel work and student counseling; adult and continuing education; comparative higher education; governance; finance; college teaching; community college; college student and student development; and teacher education (Miller & Nelson, 1994, P.51).

Ever since Stanley Hall (1893) offered the first higher education course (Ewing and Stickler 1964), the formal study of education has attracted many students and over 9,600 doctoral degrees in higher education have been awarded (Crosson and Nelson 1986; Dressel and Mayhew 1974). However, enrollment pattern in higher education doctoral programs seem to be holding steady (Crosson Nelson 1986), some higher education scholars have voiced concern about potentially dwindling enrollment (Cooper 1986; Grace and Fife 1986; Williams 1984). Others scholars such as Lewis Mayhew (1972) and Robert Alciatore (1972) worried that the market for program graduates may be becoming saturated and warned that the programs might be producing too many graduates but Patricia Crosson and Glenn Nelson (1986) reiterated this possibility in the mid-1980s (Townsend & Mason, 1990, P. 68). According to Townsend and Mason (1990), there is a concern that the market of graduates of higher education programs has been saturated, then earning the degree will be of little importance to prospective students and consequently enrollment into higher education programs may dwindle, calling to question continuation of higher education.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

I believe that the above presented literature reviews of higher education as a field of study by scholars show that higher education is a field of study in the academic world. The goal of higher education is to contribute knowledge for the improvement of human condition. In order to address the issue of how this field of study can help to encourage research that can help us understand more about higher education enterprise, which in turn will help to improve the field, there is need to improve the field by training more professionals for bureaucratic tasks, teaching and research, and institutional leadership. A consistent knowledge base with focus on higher education can help to solve the disparity of thought over what is and should be a required basic understanding of the field. Students of higher education should be well informed about professional jobs

openings and jobs opportunities should be created as they graduate in order to reduce the market saturation of professional field. Finally, there

should be enough funding to help in the running and maintaining the school of education in any given college or university to be able to solve the problem of enrollment.

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