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#### **Author**

Gardner, David P.

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SETTING THE SCENE: THE IMPORTANCE OF QUALITY

David Pierpont Gardner  
President, University of Utah

Critical Choices in Western Higher Education

A Regional Conference on Policy Alternatives for Quality,  
Finance, and Coordination in the 80s

Denver, Colorado

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## SETTING THE SCENE: THE IMPORTANCE OF QUALITY

### INTRODUCTION

The Western United States has a history of distinctiveness known the world over. From the days of the "Wild West" to more contemporary times, the West has been characterized by geographical expansiveness, an informal life style, and by opportunity and growth. Similarly, the character of education in the West has earned a certain measure of distinctiveness, i.e., overwhelming public as opposed to private control, and an emphasis upon the value of equality and open access. Our educational systems in the West are also characterized by the fact that they are still relatively young and in the process of developing a mature character. The emphasis upon higher education in the West has been along the horizontal dimension, i.e., expansion in the numbers of institutions to meet the demands of geographical expansiveness, population growth, and access with qualitative considerations being pursued as a primary goal in only a handful of institutions.

Our historic concern for and indeed preoccupation with access and equality, or the horizontal dimension of educational policy, may have brought some measure of distortion to our educational system which, unless recognized and forthrightly addressed, will have major long term adverse consequences. Before addressing specific concerns about the vertical dimension of our educational systems, i.e., issues associated with attaining and sustaining quality and high standards, let me first refer to the problems being experienced along the horizontal line.

A recent, widely publicized WICHE study projecting numbers of high school graduates throughout the U.S. portrays extensive variation among regions and the several states.

Let me briefly characterize the nature and extent of these:

Between 1979 and 1991, the projected percentage change in number of high school graduates for the

U.S. as a whole and its regions are as follows:

- for the U.S. as a whole: a decline of 26%
- for the Northeast region: a decline of 40%
- for the Northcentral region: a decline of 32%
- for the Southeast Southcentral region: a decline of 13%
- for the Western region a decline of 16%
- for the Western region (excluding CA): a decline of 8%

Variations within the Western region range from an expected decline of 24 percent in California to an increase of 21 percent in Wyoming. High school graduates, of course, constitute only the age pool from which colleges and universities have traditionally drawn students and these percentages do not necessarily translate directly into enrollment projections owing to changes in the participation rates of both the usual as well as of other age groups.

Thus, within the region, California with its well developed system of community colleges, state colleges and universities, and university system facing a projected decline in the college age pool, confronts very different policy questions than does Wyoming with its widely scattered yet rapidly growing college aged population enrolled in relatively few institutions of higher education.

One, therefore, is tempted to describe and examine any number of policy issues which well deserve our attention at this conference. For example:

1. Variations in the tax capacity and tax effort among the several Western states. They are, as you know, significant. According to preliminary 1978 fiscal year data included in the McCoy/Halstead study entitled, Higher Education Financing in the Fifty States,\* "tax capacity" in the 13 Western states, as measured against a national norm or index of 100 percent, varied from a low of 84 in Utah to a high of 147 in Nevada. Tax effort similarly varies substantially from a low of 81.5 in Wyoming to 120.7 in California. From an analysis of these and other data, one could generate some interesting, and in all probability controversial, conclusions on ability and willingness to pay for such tax-supported services as higher education.

2. Differences in higher education governance systems. The perennial issue of devising more appropriate governing structures for higher education is currently at issue in my own state where the Governor has convened an ad hoc committee to evaluate and recommend changes in arrangements for the governance of vocational education institutions.

3. Differences in the relative emphasis given to vocational as opposed to other forms of postsecondary education.

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\*Marilyn McCoy and D. Kent Halstead, Higher Education Financing in the Fifty States: Interstate Comparisons Fiscal Year 1976, Review Edition, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, September 1979, see Appendix C.

4. Significant shifts in the composition of the pool from which higher education will draw its students in the coming decade. Dramatic shifts have occurred in the ethnic composition of Los Angeles County. The policy implications of Hispanics, who traditionally have had substantially lower higher education participation rates, constituting a majority of the secondary school population in Los Angeles County, are challenging traditional patterns of recruitment and concern for the preparation of high school students.

5. Variations in policies centered on the economics of education, ranging from education as an investment or an expenditure, to out-of-pocket costs as opposed to total costs including foregone income, to the capacity of students to pay user charges or tuition.

6. The impact of Federal government policy initiatives in education and the uncertainty now surrounding them, health care, social work, and other areas of particular interest to institutions of higher education.

7. The significant, yet often neglected, issues of higher education's capital plant, viz.,

- the deterioration of buildings due in large part to the absence of an adequately-funded maintenance and replacement program
- the diminished capacity of our libraries to maintain the breadth and depth of resources in the face of extraordinary rates of inflation in acquisition of books and other materials
- the inability of our institutions to replace outdated and obsolete equipment in order to remain

on the cutting edge of research or just to send graduates into the world of work, having been trained on equipment currently in use.

8. The real and continuing erosion of faculty salaries relative to other professions.

Although each of these issues is important and could form the basis of significant and fruitful discussion, I prefer to focus on a different issue, viz., the pivotal question of quality -- how do we keep it if we have it and how do we secure it if we don't?

Decline in Student Preparedness for College and Implications  
for Higher Education Policy

Over the past two decades we have witnessed a pronounced and steady decline in the average ACT and SAT test scores of high school seniors headed for college. Evidence of further decline is mixed with the College Board reporting that average scores on the SAT leveled out this year, and with the American Testing Service reporting further declines on the average ACT score. Rather than cite national data on these well-publicized trends, some of which are included in your background materials, I wish to cite the case of one of our Western states, California, for purposes of illustrating the absolute decline in preparedness, its standing compared with national trends, and its implied impact upon institutions of higher education everywhere. These data from California

appear to be particularly important owing to the place and position California holds educationally in our region.

The California Assessment Program (CAP), an annual testing of reading and math skills of the state's third, sixth, and twelfth graders conducted by the state's Department of Education, confirms the slow but steady decline in achievement levels of California's public school students. Twelve years ago, however, a reversal of this trend was observed in third-grade reading scores and in the 1977-78 school year, sixth-grade scores turned upward in all areas tested. Similar improvements in the performance of twelfth-graders have not as yet occurred. Michael Kirst of Stanford University reports that compared to 1970 norms, California's median twelfthgrade students fall nine percentile points below the national norm in reading, 16 percentile points below in written expression, and seven percentile points below in mathematics.\*

Kirst further reports some very interesting data relative to trends in the number of basic academic courses taken by high school students. The College Board, which annually compiles questionnaire data reports that of the students taking the SAT examination in 1978-79, 65 percent of the male students and 45 percent of the female students took four or more years of mathematics; in California, 53 percent of male and 32 percent of female students took an equivalent

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\*Michael W. Kirst, "Loss of Support for Public Secondary Schools: Some Causes and Solutions," Daedalus, Summer 1981, pp. 45-68.



amount of math. Additionally, California students report receiving higher grades than the average student nationally. In summarizing these and other data, such as enrollment in honors courses and expectations for advanced placement in college, Kirst notes that California high school students "studied academic subjects for fewer years while in high school, were enrolled in smaller percentages of honors courses, were given higher grades and have greater expectations for advanced college placement."

Information compiled by the University of California's Policy Committee to Assist Unprepared Students corroborates and amplifies findings of the California Assessment Program.

We are convinced, by test score trends, basic skills course enrollment trends, and anecdotal evidence, that a decline in the skill level of UC's entering freshmen has occurred. In fact, although, on the average, UC freshmen still score well above the national means of the College Board's SAT exams, those mean scores have been declining faster than the national means or the means for all college-bound seniors in California. In 1968, not one campus of the University had as many as half its entering students scoring below 550 on the SAT-Verbal exam; in 1979, more than half of the entering students scored below 550 on all eight UC general campuses and on five of our campuses . . . at least two-thirds of the students scored below 550.

This decline is borne out by increasing enrollments in Subject A or equivalent (remedial) writing courses and in pre-calculus math courses. Between 1975-76 and 1979-80, we estimate that the percent of UC entering freshmen taking pre-Subject A and Subject A or equivalent writing courses rose from 49% to 56%; enrollments in pre-calculus math classes rose from 36% to 49%.\*

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\*Report of the 1981 Policy Committee to Assist Unprepared Students, University of California, quoted in Kirst.

Institutions of higher education have tended to accommodate declines in the academic preparedness of entering freshmen in at least two ways. First, larger numbers and proportions of ill-prepared students in the college bound pool are admitted into the more selective institutions today than before because of inflated grade point averages at the secondary school level. Secondly, colleges and universities have offered an expanding range of remedial courses in an attempt to compensate for inadequate preparation. In a recent survey conducted by the Conference Board of the Mathematical Sciences, preliminary data show that enrollment in remedial mathematics courses, i.e., pre-college algebra, in four-year colleges and universities rose 71 percent during the period 1975-1980. During this same period, total enrollments rose less than 8 percent.\* This trend, of course, impacts the graduation standards as well as the admission standards of colleges and universities.

The mounting national concern for student preparedness, academic standards, and college entrance requirements is an encouraging trend and is sufficiently widespread and intensely shared to serve as a basis for change. The concern is arising, however, at a time when many institutions of higher education already face the prospect of enrollment decline solely as a function of demographics. Thus, if an institution, in the face of demographically induced enrollment declines,

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\*Report of the Survey Committee, Conference Board of the Mathematical Sciences, forthcoming.

but in consideration of wishing to establish a more exacting and rigorous educational program, raises its classroom standards and standards of admissions, it runs the risk of compounding its enrollment losses and, therefore, of further eroding an already threatened budget. Ironically, the educational conditions are ripe for improving expectations and standards of quality, yet the methods and practices of funding based largely upon quantitative considerations mitigate against qualitative judgments that risk further funding losses. Under these conditions there will be strong institutional resistance to the taking of any steps, however educationally meritorious, that would further weaken the institution's fiscal condition.

It is an especially opportune time, therefore, for most Western states, which by and large are facing less precipitous declines in the college age pool than in the nation as a whole (and in some cases absolute increases rather than declines), to strive to improve the quality of education. Allow me to suggest how a state can forthrightly address the issue of raising academic standards in its educational institutions.

Each state should have, somewhere in its higher educational system, an institution or institutions where the highest quality of academic work is supported as a matter of public policy. The rationale underlying such a policy is straightforward: a standard or ensign of quality will have a rallying effect upon all institutions, elementary, secondary,

and postsecondary. The quality of the entire educational system will be raised by the existence and nurturing of excellence at the top as long as there are sound and workable policies with regard to transferability and articulation among the several parts of the system. To some this strategy suggests a policy of elitism as opposed to egalitarianism. In reality, it is a means of nurturing our best minds while at the same time raising the quality of education for all.

In an era of fiscal constraints and prospective enrollment decline, does the idea of emphasizing and enhancing quality with its implication for increased expenditures merit sufficient support within the political and educational context of our several states? The answer should be a resounding yes. I genuinely believe that quality carries its own influence and attracts its own political support. As those of us who are intimately involved in building political coalitions supportive of the causes of higher education know all too well, support comes by and large not from an easily identified and highly disciplined constituency to whose members direct benefits flow; rather, it comes from what sometimes appears to be a very delicate if not a tenuous coalition of those who believe that quality education does in fact make a difference in the fabric of our society, in the lives of individual citizens, and in the viability of our economy.

States need to take deliberate initiatives to foster quality and excellence in education. Failure to do so ensures a policy of educational drift and a continued waning

of public support. The state of Florida has recently taken a series of initiatives which bear scrutiny on the part of other states. Based upon the recommendations of a blue-ribbon gubernatorial commission on postsecondary education, the legislature has enacted several new funding initiatives to enhance the quality of education in Florida:

(1) In an attempt to attract and retain the best quality faculty, an 18 percent salary increase was enacted for the nine campus State University System during 1980-81.

(2) In an effort to make the teaching profession in general more attractive to top quality individuals, the legislature enacted a five-year plan whereby salaries for teachers at all levels of education in Florida will come to be ranked among the top 12 states.

(3) A \$15 million endowment trust fund was established by the legislature to attract top scholars to the State University System. This is a matching fund allocated to those universities able to raise private gifts for endowed professorships. To date, 10 new endowed chairs have been jointly funded and have attracted leading scholars to Florida.

(4) A \$40 million appropriation was enacted for purposes of "quality improvement" in the State University System. Emphasis upon the distinctive character of excellence of particular institutions was a principal criterion in allocation of these funds, e.g., enhancements to the University of Florida's engineering programs and Florida State

University's public administration and fine and performing arts programs.

(5) A three-year phasing of what now constitutes \$72 million for a PREP Program -- funding targeted at diagnosis and "treatment" of remedial learning problems in kindergarten through third grade. The rationale here is to identify and treat these problems early, thereby avoiding longer term costs and adverse impact upon the curriculum and climate of schooling in later years.

These quality initiatives, spearheaded by Governor Graham and widely supported by legislators, gained widespread public support particularly among the industrial and business leadership. Florida's experience in recruiting new industry and business to the state confirms that the quality of the state's schools and colleges is an extremely important factor in the willingness of people to locate in Florida.

As demonstrated in the case of Florida, funding selected institutions and/or programs as centers of excellence will necessitate the modification or abandonment of formulas which distribute funds equally across institutions or programs irrespective of mission or distinctiveness. The alternative to investing in centers of excellence is to continue along the present course of a general leveling and homogenization of standards, thereby reinforcing attitudes of tolerance for mediocracy and fostering a continuation of the withdrawal of confidence in public education that we have been witnessing in recent years. Incidentally,

the UGC in Great Britain has been making just such qualitative judgments for years -- 3%-25% in most recent grant allocations.

What should state level policy makers expect in the way of accountability and return on these types of investments in quality? Any major investment, such as the case of Florida or other investments intended to improve the quality of education, should be accompanied by a willing response on the part of institutions of higher education to account for that investment. Institutions should, as a part of an investment proposal, articulate what they are doing to improve quality, why the course of action undertaken makes sense, and what its implementation to the students and the state will mean.

#### Conclusions.

By way of conclusion, let me summarize the principal points of a strategy to improve the quality of education offered in the thirteen Western states.

1. While enrollment and fiscal decline tend to dominate discussions of educational policy in today's environment, the issue of quality education is far more important in both the short and long term, and deserves far more attention than it is currently being given in legislatures, regents' meetings, and institutional deliberations. To neglect the importance of raising the quality of education, in deference to other issues which may be engaging the political and governing processes, is to concentrate attention

on short term, survival-related issues instead of educationally strategic plans needed to secure the future well-being of our educational system and the investment in our human resources which is fundamental to the nation's long term viability.

2. Secondly, we should acknowledge the risk institutions run of compounding demographically induced enrollment decline with qualitatively induced decline and take steps to hold fiscally harmless those institutions that opt for the latter even though confronted with the former.

3. Thirdly, I am suggesting that each state should undertake measures to augment the budgets and programs of selected institutions as centers of excellence within its educational system. Policy and budgetary measures explicitly designed and targeted to effect improvements in quality and academic standards under either conditions of increasing or declining enrollments will serve the best interests of the state as a whole and should be politically arrangeable.

4. Finally, institutions should recognize that they carry the burden of devising and sustaining such initiatives for gubernatorial and legislative consideration intended to improve educational quality and, if successful, they are responsible for demonstrating that the results warranted the investment.