



BETWEEN FORUMS

Cameron Fincher, *Associate Editor for AIR*

On Comparing Apples and Oranges

To Learn, Compare.

I. A. Richards, *How To Read A Page*

I'm going to name two things and I want you to tell me how they are alike and how are they different. In what way are . . . and . . . alike, and how are they different?

Year VIII, test 4 in the 1937 edition of the Stanford-Binet Tests of Intelligence, Form L.

The intelligent comparison of institutions and programs in higher education may be the strongest challenge that institutional researchers face in the 1980s. Retrenchment and reform, whether in the form of strategic planning or legislative mandate, will require comparisons of institutions and programs that most researchers, planners, and evaluators make reluctantly and poorly. Yet, if institutions of higher education are to meet successfully such challenges, programs and services must be reduced selectively and on the basis of comparisons that are made intelligently *and* fairly. The greatest threat to institutions and programs may indeed be across-the-board cuts that reduce excellence and mediocrity with equitable indifference.

If the classical Greeks were correct in their definition of intelligence as the ability to perceive similarities in the things that are different and to perceive differences in things that are similar, most of the comparisons currently made in higher education are only half-intelligent. Those who seek quality too often fixate on similarities that are superficial and easily detected. Occasional bows are made in the direction of obvious differences, but serious consideration of those differences does not prevent sweeping generalizations about the nature of excellence and its attribution to common or similar features in programs, facilities, services, students, faculty, or leadership (Fincher, 1985). Nowhere is the fallacy better illustrated than in academic responses to Peters and Waterman's (1982) best seller on excellence in business corporations. Many academic leaders have assumed that the similarities between universities and corporations are more important than any differences between the two, and they have accepted, with embarrassing gullibility,

Peters and Waterman's thesis that corporate excellence is a function of similar management practices. Very few noticed that Peters and Waterman declined to discuss corporate differences or the characteristics of corporate failures because such matters had been overemphasized in the past.

In academe there is something of a license to speak freely of similarities among institutions and programs when we are discussing their excellence or their failures—and when we are discussing other institutions! Presidents and deans are free to compare their institutions or programs to Harvard, Stanford, or Berkeley when self-congratulations are ceremoniously in order. But in most discussions with funding, sponsoring, governing, and regulatory bodies, academic leaders take license to emphasize the differences that distinguish their respective institutions and programs from others. Almost without exception, there are differences in programs, facilities, services, students, faculty, and historical circumstance that necessitate differential funding and/or preferential treatment.

COMPARISONS ARE INEVITABLE

Comparative judgments are the basis of virtually all we do in measuring, assessing, and evaluating educational resources, processes, and outcomes. It thus becomes imperative that in making judgments of institutional and program effectiveness we should specify the characteristics, features, or attributes on which we are making our judgments. Because of the many institutional and program attributes that can serve as a basis for comparative judgments, institutional researchers and evaluation specialists should not only define the variables chosen for comparative purposes but specify the criteria by which such variables were chosen. Convenience is a criterion often applied, but it is not a criterion that is easily justified.

To make intelligent comparisons, it would seem most appropriate to deal with both similarities and differences that have been critically selected. Whether similarities or differences are preponderant in such comparisons is a matter of both original purpose or intent *and* good sensitivity to their relative merits in the process of gathering and examining relevant data and information. In other words, having decided previously that similarities are of major importance for particular comparisons, researchers should not prematurely dismiss or accommodate differences that might be more relevant.

The data or information used in comparative judgments may be either cross-sectional or longitudinal. When used for institutional and program comparisons in higher education, however, both kinds of data are often suspect. Despite commendable efforts by the federal government and various state agencies to develop uniform reporting systems, the greater bulk of

data gathered on institutions and programs has wrinkles and creases that lose much in the way of comparability. Neither federal nor state authorities have been able to agree on reporting categories that are well-defined, sufficiently consistent, mutually exclusive, exhaustive, and “user-friendly.” Reporting categories have shifted with changes in administration and with bureaucratic preferences. At the institutional level, the comparability of both cross-sectional and longitudinal data has been lost through the faulty suppositions of newly appointed data analysts or with the acquisition of new data-processing equipment and different computational systems. It is a rare institution that has both forms of information well-stored and easily retrieved.

COMPARATIVE/HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

To compare in significant and meaningful ways the similarities and differences of higher education institutions and their diverse programs and services, longitudinal or historical/developmental information would appear to be particularly crucial. Cross-sectional comparisons, despite their many weaknesses, are relevant to status reports that may be needed from time to time, but such comparisons tell us virtually nothing about how institutions and programs attained their status, reputation, or perceived quality. To appreciate the status and function of contemporary institutions and programs, it is necessary to learn more about their historical origins and development. To understand the attained or ascribed status of institutions, knowledge and information about their longitudinal development—and that of comparable institutions—are essential.

Neither institutional researchers nor evaluation specialists are likely to welcome a challenge to study comparatively the historical development of institutions and programs. Yet, historical/comparative information is precisely the kind of informed basis that is needed for decisions of institutional retrenchment or merger, program reduction or elimination, and curricular reform or revision. It is not inappropriate to say that all institutions of higher education have their own history, traditions, and conventions. Each institution is, to some extent, unique in the historical circumstances that brought about its establishment, in the sociocultural forces that fostered its growth or delayed its development, and in the idiosyncratic path taken to its eventual status and reputation as a college or university. Comparisons perfunctorily made with superficially similar but historically different institutions are inherently misleading.

In much the same manner academic programs, student and community services, and even courses of instruction have their own history and peculiar lifespan. Each begins under circumstances that are perceived at the time as

advantageous or mandatory. Funds become available for initial efforts and hopes are formed for continued and additional support. Personnel are either at hand or recruitable for future purposes. Launched in such a manner, program and services inevitably acquire their own momentum, their own constituencies, and their own forms of self-justification. As evidenced by their annual reports, all render invaluable service to the institution in which they are located.

Courses of instruction, in particular, have histories that should be carefully reviewed in decisions of course modification or reduction. Innumerable courses begin as the expressed research or teaching interests of a dedicated faculty member, and many have known moments of popularity and possible despair. Given longevity by partisan faculty, many courses will undergo their own "time of troubles" as faculty retire or resign and are replaced by faculty members who would rather design and implement courses more in keeping with their own research and teaching interests. Unless firmly established within the harbor of required course work for traditional degrees, many courses of instruction do not survive the second generation of instructors who are assigned courses they did not develop.

SIMILAR AND DIFFERENT

Comparative judgments based on comparable, objective, valid, and reliable cross-sectional data and including appreciation of historical/developmental information about institutions and programs is a large order for institutional researchers, planners, and evaluators. If such judgments must be based on further consideration of both similarities and differences among comparable institutions and programs, only the hardiest of strategic planners will be left on the field of battle, and they will not know why the troops have fled.

There are excellent reasons, nonetheless, to believe that institutional and program comparisons must address both similarities and differences in cross-sectional and longitudinal forms. Institutional retrenchment, program review or reduction, and curricular reform or revision—to be both intelligent and fair—should be predicated on institutional studies that are fully appreciative of institutional and program history and in full command of comparative data and information that are significant and meaningful. The need for systematic, objective, valid, and reliable forms of measurement, assessment, and evaluation has never been more urgent.

Cameron Fincher

REFERENCES

- Fincher, C. (1985). What makes schools, corporations, and universities great? *Research in Higher Education* 22: 209-213.
- Peters, T. J., and Waterman, R. H., Jr. (1982). *In Search of Excellence*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Richards, I. A. (1942). *How to Read a Page*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Terman, L. A., and Merrill, M. A. (1937). *Measuring Intelligence*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.