Book Reviews

Trevor Colbourn, Editor

David Riesman, *On Higher Education: The Academic Enterprise in an Era of Rising Student Consumerism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998). 459 pp. $29.95.

This book was originally written in 1970 by David Riesman and is now reissued by Transaction Press. It brings the reader in contact with the thinking of a person who long dominated scholarly inquiry into higher education. This is the same David Riesman of the keen sociological eye whose studies in the 1950s and 1960s captured the attention of a generation with his illuminating focus on American society (especially as presented in *The Lonely Crowd* and *Individualism Reconsidered*). Subsequently, he turned his incisive intellect to the analysis of higher education and its evolution. *On Higher Education* is one of his major contributions to this field of inquiry, a subject that occupied the rest of his scholarly life.

The volume brings together eleven chapters on a variety of topics that often seem to be separate essays rather than parts of an integrated book. What rescues it from its disjointed form is that the reader is always acutely aware of the guiding curiosity and intelligence of an author who leads us from question to issue to the next topic in a skillful and stimulating excursion into diverse areas of higher education.

Riesman's curiosity and interests seem unacquainted with the restrictions of traditional disciplinary boundaries as he surveys subjects as diverse and far-ranging as students, student disaffection, faculty hegemony, educational change, the dynamics of student choice, accrediting institutions, and forms of government intervention for consumer protection. And throughout what is always clear is his deep involvement and concern with all of these issues and his desire to ask searching questions that will stimulate the reader to think about how to make things better.

The book is subtitled, "The Academic Enterprise in an Era of Rising Student Consumerism," an apt positing of the challenge that Riesman views as the central conflict of American higher education. He analyzes the situation as a struggle of conflicting institutions and interests that have challenged and displaced traditional structures of power and authority as colleges have expanded far beyond their original mandates and missions. The dominant forces of society and culture have created an increasing body of consumers and vested interests that have undermined the traditional roles and rules of the game.

Faculty hegemony, which originally set the tone and content, has been supplanted by a large group of consumers who are not up to the demands of higher education, and by a professoriate who, through domination of departmental lines of authority, have succeeded in resisting and undermining reform efforts. Although the major hope for reform lies in the great innovators of the sort who have dominated the history of higher

education, their efforts seem doomed to frustration because vested interests are so opposed to change.

Riesman, liberal in his social critiques, is also the cautious innovator and protector of traditional authority, which he sees as being undermined by the weakening of traditional faculty and institutional preeminence. Instead, as colleges compete to attract students, they cater to the dictates of a marketplace dominated by student consumerism. Educational policies have been determined more by a perception of what had to be done to hold students than by a clear assessment of what it is that students needed to learn. Requirements and standards were diluted due to fear that consumers—the customers—would be driven away. Students, instead of taking advantage of their new power to make education more responsive to their needs, became passive and ignorant consumers who did not exert pressures for the enhancement of quality education.

It is because of shortcomings in the "academic enterprise," reflected in the behavior of faculty, students, and administrators, that Riesman examines in detail a variety of subjects and proposes specific suggestions for reform. In the concluding chapter he deals with "government intervention for consumer protection." He believes that student consumerism is unable to respond to the challenges he poses for educational improvement, and that, therefore, more intervention and greater regulation are required for the interests of students and higher education to be represented more effectively.

A major problem for the reader is the passage of two decades since Riesman made his contributions. We miss his active voice and counsel in learning anew how to deal with his concerns. Absent his aid, or an introductory chapter to fill this gap, one can nevertheless take delight in a far-ranging intellectual discourse of a kind that seems absent from the work of most current observers.

Taken by itself, this book remains a treat. At the same time, it presents a challenge to the reader in making the leap to defining the questions and changes that have occurred since the author conducted his inquiry, and, in the spirit of Riesman, think about what needs to be done to improve the current scene.

—Stanley Moses

Lionel S. Lewis, *Scaling the Ivory Tower: Merit and Its Limits in Academic Careers* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998). 238 pp. $73.00 hardcover; $24.95 paperback.

While merit is widely believed to be the basis for tenure in higher education, Lewis reveals that this is not always the case. After a ten-year investigation of the effects of the principles of merit on university faculty, Lewis published his findings in the 1975 edition of *Scaling the Ivory Tower: Merit and Its Limits in Academic Careers.* Focusing primarily on teaching effectiveness and productive scholarship as evidence of academic merit, he synthesizes numerous studies on the professorate. In the current edition released by Transaction Publishers, a new introduction is presented with Lewis's classic work. Throughout the text, Lewis examines the premise that ascription is as

important as scholarly work in determining an individual's success at "scaling the ivory tower."

In the new introduction, Lewis contends that "a good deal of research—before 1975 and since—leaves little doubt that the meritocratic posture assumed by academia is contrary to fact." He asserts that social relationships and achievement are "so closely intertwined" that the principle of merit has yet to be sustained as the "bedrock of institutions of higher learning." Citing a 1993 study, he reports that four of the nine main factors used to evaluate faculty for retention, promotion, and tenure were not linked to academic merit, and supports his premise with a 1998 study that finds that qualities such as "whether individuals would fit in, affirmative action considerations, reputation, institutional and community service" contribute more to academic advancement. Undoubtedly, the inclusion of these recent studies serves to update and build upon the solid foundation of Lewis's original work.

In the first chapter, "Higher Education in America and the Principle of Merit," the author provides the reader with an overview of the evolution of American higher education institutions, and he explains how American universities emerged from either the German or English perspectives and how the focus shifted from teaching to research in the late 1800s. Importantly, he describes meritocracies, "organizations in which people are assigned tasks and responsibilities and successive power, prestige and rewards, on the basis of competence," and notes that the principles of merit elude academics just as they do other professionals.

Throughout the next seven chapters, Lewis continues to explore the difference between the reality and the ideal of life and advancement in higher education. In Chapter 3, he discusses professional evaluation as well as the quality and use of letters of recommendation. Next, academic culture and the role of social ethics are uncovered. The final three chapters focus on academic freedom, the expanding bureaucracy of higher education, and the "indispensability of merit," respectively. Undoubtedly, the most provocative and compelling chapters are Chapters 2 and 5, which support his premise that ascription can be as important as scholarship as a determinant of success in academia.

Lewis delves into the complexities of evaluative processes with regard to teacher effectiveness and scholarly production in Chapter 2, "The Evaluation of Teaching and Publication," and finds that judgments about teaching effectiveness were typically based, not on empirical evidence, but, unfortunately, on hearsay. He reports that assessment of publication is subjective and inaccurate, since it is often based on quantity, not quality, and, moreover "what is written is often not read." Based on his analysis, he calls "the assertion that academics must publish or perish...a gross overstatement" and later adds that publication "...is neither necessary nor sufficient for scaling the ivory tower."

In Chapter 5, "The Appointment Process: On Achievement and Ascription," Lewis succinctly clarifies achievement as "status acquired through effort, ability, knowledge, and skill" and ascription as "status already held." He continually validates his contention that ascription permeates the appointment process, and not only does he delineate an array of ascriptive qualities such as personal connections, the prestige of the doctoral university, and social class, he also stresses the negative cumulative effects of

these qualities. Notably, he addresses issues facing academic women and provides a preponderance of evidence "that females are not evaluated in terms of merit, that something more than their competence is taken into account when they are candidates for a vacancy in a university." As the chapter concludes, the reader has little doubt about the influence of ascription on careers of academic men and women.

Throughout the book, Lewis adeptly argues his position that ascription and factors other than merit are central to advancement of academic careers. His premise was no less valid in 1998 than in 1975, when the original text was published. Changes in the academic landscape and culture of higher education have yet to significantly advance the principle of academic merit. Certainly, the text provokes the reader to look closely at institutions of higher learning and their promotion practices and to seek those where academic merit reigns.

—Micki M. Caskey