

The New University: Should We Fear the Future?



AN INTERVIEW WITH: **Prof. Henry Rosovsky**

Prof. Henry Rosovsky, Former Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Harvard University, and a well-known expert and author on higher education, visited the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities in November 1999.

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What do people fear, and is it realistic?

ROSOVSKY: Well, the "nightmare" scenario is that electronic educational technology will develop to the point that prepackaged computer-run programs will replace the campus-based university with a cable TV station and computer server in a basement somewhere in an industrial park. This seems unlikely. First, universities are among the oldest and most persistent of all modern social institutions. Second, many strengths of the traditional university (such as mentoring relationships, socialization and credibility of certification) cannot be easily be replicated elsewhere.

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But you do see change?

ROSOVSKY: Of course. What universities know has become important to society, and (as suggested by my friend Prof. Richard Chait of the Harvard Graduate School of Education) consumerism, capitalism, and commercialism will increasingly threaten its primary goals. Furthermore, barriers to entry are rapidly being lowered, substitute institutions are on the rise, faculty power is weakening, and faculty institutional loyalty is decreasing even as inter-university competition increases. This will require a response.

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So what are your own fears?

ROSOVSKY: First, I particularly fear unchecked consumerism and commercialization. We must know where to draw the line to preserve academic quality and values. Second, market-driven education can leave serious gaps in such fields as humanities and some basic sciences. Third, recent increases in population and affluence have led to uncontrolled institutional differentiation and the rapid growth of for-profit educational institutions. This can lead to student exploitation, as when unprincipled foreign institutions peddle sub-standard degrees all over the world ... perhaps even in Israel.

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So what is the solution?

ROSOVSKY: We need a rational overall national system of higher education, one embracing research universities, regional colleges, vocational schools, virtual universities, etc. It should be stratified, since mass education and research excellence require different types of institutions; but joint resources such as libraries, computer centers and teaching laboratories are particularly suitable for sharing by a number of the new colleges. The California system is the closest we now have to this integrated, multilayer approach. Finally, faculty consensus and votes will not promote needed changes as effectively as strong executive leadership willing to make unpopular decisions.

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Should Israel's research universities leave undergraduate education to the colleges?

ROSOVSKY: No. Most undergraduates will probably study in colleges, and some of them will undoubtedly go on to graduate work in universities. But there are some undergraduates with particularly outstanding intellectual capacities who will benefit enormously from the more liberal and flexible education provided by a research-oriented faculty. This becomes all the more important when the system of secondary education has declined in quality. Colleges and universities in Israel have distinct roles. The college system also provides the universities an opportunity for taking a brand new look at their undergraduate curricula, to aim it towards more highly selected students.