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*Respite for Sciolism*

David S. DeShon  
*Western Michigan University*

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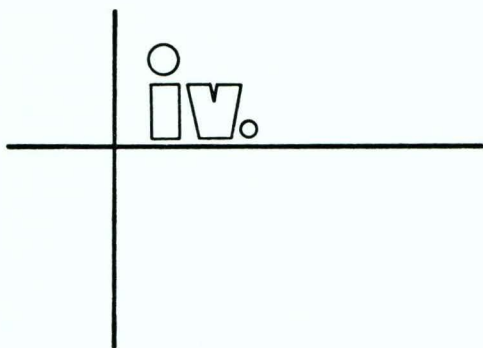
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## Respite for Sciolism

*Higher Education: Demand and Response*, Edited by W. R. Niblett; San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1970. 267 pages.

Why should there be still another new book on the problems of higher education? Are there still more problems to be discovered? Do we still hope in vain, book after book, that someone has some answers? Or does a periodic up-date on the continuing saga of Mao and Scrooge offer enough justification to a publisher to risk his printing costs? Maybe there are still enough of the uninitiated around that it doesn't really matter—anything at all will sell. If you are among the uninitiated *Higher Education: Demand and Response* will serve—it exposes the problems about as well as any other single book and even gives a few scattered insights into some of the stock *responses* to them. In these respects, it is quite adequate.

The book does have redeeming social significance, not so much for what it says, but for what it reveals. It exposes a nerve ending on the problems of higher education as they are understood by intellectual panjandrums in three major western countries. It is composed of the papers and edited floor commentary from a conference involving college and university presidents, vice-chancellors, officials of foundations, deans, directors of institutes and distinguished experts of professorial rank. They came from institutions in Canada, Great Britain and the United States. They were an imposing group and likely representative of some of the best thinking available on such lofty planes. As one might suspect, it's no less confused than what one hears under more ordinary circumstances. In some respects it is not as good. Being lofty involves being out of touch with ordinary circumstances, yet it is these circumstances which threaten academic hegemony and produced the rationale for the conference in the first place.

The chapters (papers) reveal that officialdom regards the demands

made upon it as great and of varied origin. There are the taxpayers, government agencies and granting institutions. There is general public opinion, political activity and there are parents. There are various internal tensions but especially the intransigent departments which are depicted as the misdemeanants of change. Several chapters deal specifically with students, but even those which do not, recognize that student activism lies behind the whole question of *demand* and *response*. There is an admission that student activism has speeded up much needed and long overdue changes.

The editor indicates that the purpose of the conference was to explore philosophical problems of higher education, but this was hardly carried out. Most attention was devoted to operational problems and to students, not one of whom was listed as being present. The effort to understand students showed the usual academic disinclination to live in the present. Even Nevitt Sanford's excellent paper was little more than a restatement of other excellent things he has done. One wonders if the wages of fame isn't redundancy. But then, Sanford is venerable and thus acceptable. Northrop Frye's effort to understand the radical critique traced it appropriately through Bakunin and Kropotkin—appropriately, that is, unless you want to communicate to students who have never heard of these people and couldn't care less. In fact, the most modern reference to a radical critique one finds—aside from what appears to be journalistic commentary—is to Paul Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd* (1956). The conference had the aura of bringing the higher reaches of academe up to the insights of Thorstein Veblen's *The Higher Learning in America* (1918). There are, of course, references to more modern works, but only Martin Trow's and Richard Hoggart's chapters show much effort to see what students are up to now.

But in spite of these problems of comprehension and timeliness, one does sense a willingness to change and a general resiliency toward the future. The sessions appear to have been open. There was a sincere effort to grasp the significance of the present scene and repression appears not to be the preferred response these people will make toward future demands. They explored and shared many problems together. They generally expressed a liberal, egalitarian and democratic hope for the future. But from the commentary which followed the paper, it is clear that they went away from the conference with no coherent philosophy of what higher education should be. Nor did they acquire a very workable understanding of what students are about. What they did learn is not likely to be enough, but at least it was a safe thing to do. It's a safe book to read.

David S. DeShon  
College of General Studies  
Western Michigan University

