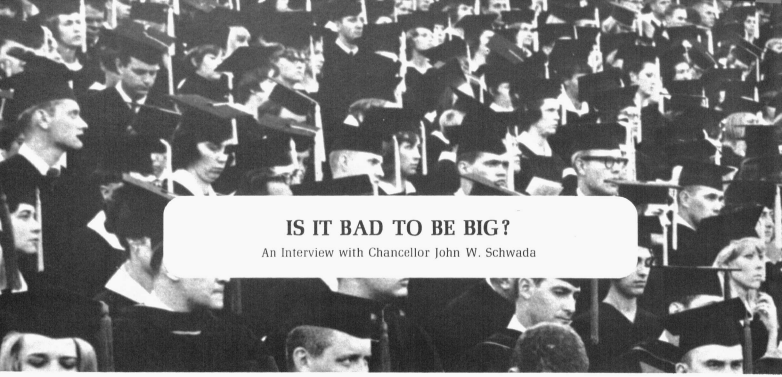


IS IT BAD TO BE BIG?

An Interview with Chancellor John W. Schwada

BY ANY STANDARD, the Columbia campus is big: in numbers of students, academic offerings, research projects, in facilities. In being so big, Dr. Schwada, can we also be effective?

I certainly think so. Yes, we are big — twenty thousand students would place us among the 15 or 20 largest campuses in the country. But this does not carry with it the implication that we cannot be effective. In fact, it seems to me that the size and varied character of this campus are among its great assets.

In what way?

We have in Columbia about every kind of teaching and research program, with a few exceptions, which one might find anywhere in any university. So as a result, we have opportunities for interdisciplinary efforts in both teaching and research. All the disciplines are present and in close contact with one another.

For example, let's take the area of nutrition. It calls for knowledge in the fields of botany, agriculture, zoology, medicine, veterinary medicine, and other areas as well. If we did not have a School of Medicine here, a College of Agriculture, a School of Veterinary Medicine, and all the basic arts and science disciplines, we simply couldn't carry forward a strong program in nutrition. Here's another case: South Asian studies is a special area of concentration calling for languages, political science, history, geography, sociology, economics, art, literature, and philosophy. You see, on a complex campus we can carry forward that kind of study effectively.

Has this helped us to recruit and retain top faculty?

Certainly. I was talking with one of our outstanding scholars a few days ago. He told me, quite frankly, he wouldn't have come to our campus except for its diversity. Here, he could meet colleagues in all kinds of disciplines to talk about his interests and enlist their support in his research and teaching programs. He is fascinated with this broad opportunity to associate with scholars in many different fields.

Don't the students also benefit from these varied contacts?

There isn't any question about it. The finest educational opportunities available to students today are in the big public university campuses. Take cultural opportunities, for example. Not many small colleges or universities can attract the kinds of cultural programs that we find here regularly, even daily, on this campus. The student can come here and change his major from one field to another; he doesn't have to transfer to another college or university. He may choose pretty freely in this broad range of opportunities we have at Columbia. And the broadening experiences of encountering students of all types from all parts of the nation, from all parts of the world, cannot be overestimated. This, to me, is a vital aspect

of a student's educational process. I was interested in talking to a mother and father at Parent's Day last fall. The mother clearly had some concern about this big university, about her daughter being lost in it. It was just as clear — and the young lady was with them — that the student wasn't lost. She was enjoying it. The father made a comment which, I think, expressed my feelings very well. He said, "After all, you know, this is a very big world, and it seems to me that our daughter might begin to get acquainted with it during this period of her college career." In other words, here's the maturing process. And if she is going out into a very large world, why not come to a large university and begin to get adapted to working with all kinds of people in this kind of a setting? There are tremendously exciting personal opportunities in a large university which simply cannot exist in the typical smaller institution.

But isn't it possible for some students to "get lost"?

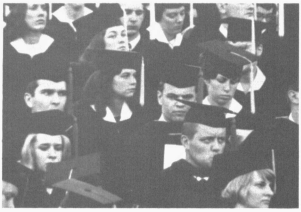
Yes, of course, it is. But it's possible for them to be quite as lost in a small school. I talk to students when I can — and when they will — and I had the chance to talk to several students not long ago about this very thing. They felt that they had more opportunity for personal contacts here than they would have in a smaller school. Now, pretty obviously, this varies from experience to experience, from school to school. But, certainly, there is no reason to believe that the student has a greater chance of being lost here than he would somewhere else.

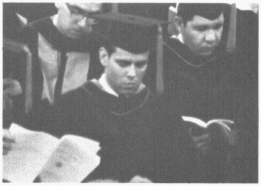
How do students go about getting personal attention?

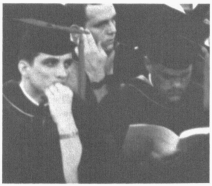
Well, I think it's pretty much a question of whether a student wants to establish personal contacts with his fellow students, with his faculty, and with the administrators. There are several hundred student organizations here, all of which are eagerly hoping that students will join. If a student has a particular interest, he can find an organization here which will have a group of students with like interests. He lives with other students in a house, in a dorm, or in some kind of a grouping. He sits in classes with students, and if he has selected a particular program, then he'll run into these students many times and form personal relationships.

What about contacts with the faculty?

I suppose one of the questions which is most frequently raised on the part of students, and it's a legitimate question, is that they don't have enough personal contact, or receive enough personal attention from faculty. I have some doubt that this is the case. The most frequent complaint I hear from the faculty is that students do not come to them, do not discuss with them their programs, their problems, or do not simply come in to get acquainted. Every







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student on this campus has an advisor who is a faculty member. Everyone of these advisors, I know from my own experience, would enjoy spending some time with that student.

Are classes often too big for effective teaching?

Oh, yes. I would say some of our classes are too large for the finest possible kind of teaching. However, there are fewer of these than one would sometimes believe from hearing discussions on the matter. The large classes are singled out as examples of less-than-the-best teacher-student learning relationships. And I would agree with this. We are making some changes. In some of the larger classes we are adding additional senior staff to teach and provide closer supervision of our many fine graduate students who assist in these classes. Our teaching situation is less than perfect in some of our introductory work in the very large classes, but we're making measurable progress. Our student-teacher ratio here is not yet what it must be, but it will continue to improve if resources are made available.

Do we have research programs studying more effective learning techniques?

Indeed we do. This coming year we hope to be able to expand these programs so that we can make a pretty careful study of the situations that produce the best learning experiences for our students. Some of these projects are no more complex than finding out how well a student does in a television course as compared with a course in which television is not used. The more sophisticated studies will relate not so much to the level of knowledge, but to the level of understanding. Can we develop the same understanding, the same attitudes working with some of the new techniques and media that we have always assumed could best be developed by the one teacher in the classroom of 20 students? I'm convinced that, properly used, televised instruction, programmed learning, and self-directed study offer considerable promise. After all, the students are increasingly mature. We may find that many of our students are quite capable of acquiring the basic information themselves. The teacher could reserve his time for discussion and analysis, for the transmission of concepts, for the opening of broader educational horizons for the students, rather than the simple transmission of information. If this is possible, then we can do a much better job of preparing our students for the world.

One way to measure the effectiveness of a university, it would seem, would be to take a look at its alumni in the world. Where are they now? What are they doing?

Of course, this is the ultimate test. We're not talking about credit hours or degrees. We're concerned with what a young person is when he leaves his formal education and goes into a new kind of a learning process which will extend throughout his lifetime. How well equipped is he for this? There are some crude measures. Certainly, the world of business, of industry, and of government believe we turn out a very fine product because they show up here each year to compete very briskly for the services of these young men and women. The quality of our student shows up in another area. I don't believe there is a good graduate school in the United States today which will not happily accept one of our graduates. In fact, many seek out and actively recruit them.

We have thousands of alumni — many of them members of our alumni association — who are making significant contributions to this state, the nation, even the world. In talking with alumni groups I sense their pride in their Alma Mater, their recognition after five, 10 or 15 years that this University equipped them pretty well, not only for their profession, but for their roles as citizens. The pride they feel is most impressive. It also is pleasing to see alumni increasingly give support to the University. After all, our strength and future is dependent to a great extent on the alumni. It's a dynamic relationship: a large, effective institution produces many successful graduates, who, in turn, can help the University become even more effective for future student generations. □