Know thyself

Changes should create self-criticism

By DARRELL HANCOCK

The first step toward intelligent planning for the future, as Western thinkers from Socrates to Marshall McLuhan would agree, is an understanding of how things are at present. That is, the human individual or social group most apt to be in rational control of its own destiny is the one that "knows itself."

In part, it is a function of a university to help its students mature into a stage of critical self-awareness that will permit them to live as fully as possible in the modern world.

A sad paradox in American universities in general and at Rice in particular is that these universities, which largely control the instruments of research, so rarely use those tools to evaluate themselves.

As Nevitt Sanford points out in a monumental sociological study of "The American College," institutions of higher learning have directed their "questa at the frontiers of knowledge" against the thorny problem of defining themselves.

As a result, the structure of the American university has been largely inherited from the past without any real assurance that traditional methods of lecturing, grading, assigning requirements for majors, and organizing student social environments are the best available alternatives.

Even President Johnson has said of our age that "ceaseless change is the one constant." Universities have provided intellectual force behind that acceleration of change, but they have distinctly avoided the pain of questioning their own religiously held assumptions.

In part, much of the Berkeley-styled student unrest on American campuses results from a dissatisfaction with traditional educational forms which seem irrelevant in a modern world.

Fortunately, work such as the research summarized in "The American College" offers some promise that the maturing social sciences will soon be capable of providing more complete objective data on the structure and effects of higher education.

To cite one example, present research indicates that the so-called "authoritarian" person learns better in a classroom full of authoritarians than he does in a random group. Such information, although incomplete, has definite relevance to the actual planning of classroom population.

But more importantly, social scientists as well-known as David Riesman are providing useful information on topics as diverse as the Harvard residential house system, optimal methods of structuring student-faculty relationship, and problems of freedom and authority on campus.

Ultimately, an educational reformer like former Rice professor Val Woodward may be able to draw on a body of research in order to come nearer "proving" his case for academic reorganization.

Administrators who ignored serious social scientific data would then be committing a gross hypocrisy equal to admitting that behavioral sciences are not really valid disciplines.

Actually, each educational institution, being unique, needs special research into its own particular problems. Rice, then, would make a mistake by waiting for researchers and thinkers at other schools to define and answer all the local problems.

Unfortunately, the social sciences at Rice have been a kind of forgotten step-child, although the school defined itself as a university in the mid-fifties.

It seems unlikely that Rice will follow the lead of such institutions as Harvard, Vassar, and Yale and invite outside researchers to provide objective studies of the nature of the University. Only in such obvious areas as admissions are sociological yard-sticks applied at all.

Perhaps the most significant studies of the University are presently being conducted by students themselves. The few behavioral sciences courses have spawned investigations of topics such as campus sub-cultures, stereotypes, and prejudices.

Also, the only systematic curriculum review is the SCEP survey sponsored by the Student Senate each spring.

But the range of topics available for undergraduate research is severely limited and does not include many subjects more essential for understanding Rice as an educational institution.

What, for instance, happens to freshmen here? A student researcher actually did tackle that problem four years ago and concluded that the first semester at Rice seems to be severely disillusioning, to lead to grade-grubbing, cynicism, and an unhealthy disregard for cultural and aesthetic pursuits.

The University, in the face of evidence that freshmen here are drastically mis-educated, has never taken the obvious step of financing a professional survey of the same problem.

Other questions need to be answered. What is the effect of the four-year Rice experience? Are alumni significantly more broad-minded and socially aware than the general population?

What are the social effects of college membership? Which professors promote student creativity? How can quality of teaching be evaluated? How can educational research be accomplished? They cannot be answered definitively in many cases.

Nevertheless, the University, like any other complex individual or organization, benefits from understanding rather than ignoring its complexity.

Rice in its relative immaturity as an institution needs the kind of on-going self-evaluation suggested in "The American College." Ideally the project could involve educational specialists.

At the very least, undergraduate and graduate research into the University should be strongly encouraged. A special sociology course on "the university environment," for example, might prove meaningful for students aiming towards careers in teaching, social science majors, and undergraduates sincerely interested in the processes of education.

Further, the University could co-operate by making its records available to qualified researchers with serious projects.

Of course, such work will never provide answers to all the decisions that must be made about the future of Rice University. But it will help define problems which are ignored today.

The additional information made available by social research can increase the sophistication of response to educational issues and permit the University administration to take a greater degree of control over the quality and direction of University growth.

Presently Rice seems sadly reluctant to make the giant step to self-awareness in an age when such reluctance can be fatal.