

Progressive Changes in US Universities

An Opportunity for Sikh Students

*Jasbir Singh Sethi, MS, P.E.**

** S & B Engineers & Constructors Ltd. 4210 Lemon Tree, Houston. TX. 77088. USA*

Email: jssethi@sbec.com

Welcome to American college recruiting in the 21st Century.

“Gone are the days when a University could lure High Caliber Students solely on the strength of its Academic Programs and Low Faculty to Student Ratio.” **

U.S. Universities have always been and are still a dream of students all over the world. The concept of higher education in USA has always been to promote bold thinking, conceiving and pursuing newer ideas and venture into areas not yet explored. *The number of patents applied for and Nobel Prizes won are a testimony to the overall success of this concept*. The beauty of this system is that all basic knowledge is enshrined in capsule forms in various departments. At graduate levels, there are no set syllabi. Each student, with the help of his/her advisor charts the course, using various modules in various departments that help and support the *pursuit of his individualized specialty and chartered course*.

For example, when I was doing my M.S. in Industrial Engineering in 1970-72 at Rutgers University, New Jersey, there were about 10 students. There were hardly two courses that we all took, rest every one was pursuing his own chosen specialty. My field was “Operations Research” (OR). Another was heavy in Statistical Quality Control yet another was in Plant and Process Design and so on. Not only that in my various classes in OR, there were some students who were not registered in Industrial Engineering, but other fields such as Agriculture. This cross – pollination of ideas of different fields and your own freedom to chalk out your own path was a thrilling experience. It released the creative energy of your brain. THIS WAS ACADEMIC FREEDOM.

The Universities, though considered as “Ivory Towers”, were - and are - supported and research funded by community dollars, federal grants and other corporate grants. Many times it appeared that the research topic is just a “pure research” with no applications, but there has been hardly any worthwhile pure research which ultimately did not benefit mankind.

Dr. Narinder Singh Kapany did a marvelous job in ‘bending the light’, then, seemingly a “pure research” project. But now he is one of the five “Unsung Hero of 20th century”. His research has heralded the 21st century, the modern precise micro surgery with potential of even remote surgeries, and communications revolution (India is the first beneficiary of the broad band communication which has made India the leader in outsourcing destinations).

In Houston, I see Space Center. Exploring Space was considered a futile waste of money, but the fall out of benefits from Space Program are mind boggling. Payback to Society has always been a touchstone of the Performance of a University.

To shrink this payback period, an unprecedented revolution is underway in the portals of the US “Ivory Towers.” The lead cover story of August 2006 of TIME Magazine is *“Who needs Harvard? Forget the Ivy League – the new rule of the game says the best fit is what matters”*.

The various factors that are causing this tumultuous revolution are:

(a) The college enrollments are very high. 62% more students are going to the colleges than in 60’s

(b) It is a simple equation that if there are more applicants for fixed seats, lots of them will get rejected. Princeton turned down 4 of every 5 Valedictorians. By the same token, there

are instances where students turned down selections from Harvard and Yale in preference to a “better fit” and more economical unheard of colleges.

(c) The cost of tuitions has been sky rocketing. Tuition at Harvard is \$30,000 per year for lecture hall size classes.

(d) Top schools are NOW determined to tear down barriers to entry for the brightest kids of lower middle class families (under \$60,000). “The word has gone out that if you are talented, the sky is the limit. If we don’t take advantage of that energy, America will languish.” Says Fitz Simmons – Dean Admissions at Harvard.

(e) These Big name schools are now having “*outreach tours*” to low income Zip codes and rural areas partly to maintain high caliber in class rooms and *partly in response to all kinds of social and economic trends*.

(f) Talk to teachers, counselors and students and you can glimpse a new spirit, almost LIBERATION. The second tier schools and even public colleges have become much better. University of Texas (UT) is now rated as the best education for dollars. They are becoming more attractive to both topflight professors and top ranking students thereby raising the quality of experience. “Just because you haven’t heard of a college, does not mean, it is no good.” Says Marilee Jones – Admissions Dean at M.I.T.)

(g) “Who needs Harvard?” The 10 Ivy Leagues? Their main mystique was the old boy network to get a job? Chances are the kid is going to be doing a job that does not even exist now. So connection won’t do much good. The rules have changed, the World has changed.

(h) Case Western’s University President ED Hundert envisions a close relationship between universities and their cities and surrounding communities, “Call it a combination of enlightened self interest and an awakening sense of social responsibility. At Case that idea (became) the defining force in how we set priorities and make choices. Every one from our students and faculty to our alumni and civic leaders is rallying around these initiatives. In the past universities turned their backs on their communities. But many schools have begun to work with the new paradigm of civic service and engagement. Case is poised to undertake some dramatic moves, *unprecedented in the history of higher education that promise to redefine the role of the university over the next decade.* Our core business is education and research, but when we do that at the highest level while taking seriously our social responsibilities, it enhances the quality of life in Cleveland, northern Ohio, around the country and beyond (globally).”

(i) “The fate of a school is tied to the well being of its home town (and surrounding communities)” says Laura Texel.

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR SIKHS

Recent reviews of activities in Sikh Studies in US University reflect the above summarized avalanche of monumental changes:

(1) S. Virinder Singh Grewal of Walnut California visited the Department of Religious Studies in University of California, Riverside. The appointment of Sikh Chair Person, here, has been the eye of the recent hurricane of controversy in California. His lengthy, powerful report has been posted by S.Jaspal Singh Tiwana on “learning zone yahoo group”. Mr. Grewal noted that two courses on Sikhism are being taught in UC Riverside. One course is on Bhagats (Saints) of Guru Granth Sahib and has 19 students; the second one on Sikhism has 35 students. The limit being 30, five had to be admitted with special permission. Only five of 35 are Sikh students, 30 are from other religions. The list of topics to be covered in the course is excellent.

(2) I have a flier of 2006 Vaisakhi Greetings from Sardarni Kuljeet Kaur Bindra Chair of Sikh Studies at Hofstra University announcing an intensive one week ‘3 credit summer

seminar course'; list of Annual Conferences held, Cultural Programs and an excellent idea of an "Out reach Program" of taking Sikh Students into the heart of Sikh Communities in USA and UK.

(3) Students own initiative of 15 Sikh Students at Stanford University is worth emulating. They got a '3 credit course' on Sikhism approved from Dean with no resources from the University. The plan devised by the students and approved by the Dean was based on the list of various topics to be covered by various volunteers from the community. I had the opportunity to participate in this program as a substitute teacher and what amazed me was that though there were only 15 registered students for the course but 50 plus were in attendance. The question and answer session was thrilling and showed the great thirst of the participants to explore and learn about Sikhism, particularly in the context of modern contemporary life and comparative religion aspects.

(4) I just got an email request to contact the University of Houston and arrange a presentation by a University of Houston Professor to the Sikh Community leaders to introduce a course in Sikhism in the University.

IN SUMMARY: In summary, the universities are shedding their "Ivory Tower" image and are aggressively seeking the community participation. Secondly, there is a great thirst in the academic world to learn about Sikhism. In such a receptive atmosphere there is obviously a great opportunity for Sikhs to get involved rather than sit outside with "protest placards." Let us recognize this positive shift and support and maximize benefits for spreading the message of Sikhism for the benefit of mankind.

(To keep the size of the article manageable, I have not given long list of references, but I am holding for sixty days, all the supporting documents such as Press Clippings, copies of articles, copies of emails, copies of magazine articles etc. that have been extensively used in preparing this write up. I promise to share with readers of this article the supporting material on *any specific point* they want to further investigate. Please contact Jasbir Singh Sethi at gurpurab2004@yahoo.com)**

□