Western and Japanese educators face some of the same issues, even while their common-sense social organization and practices could hardly stand in greater contrast. To see how such issues are debated in Japan could therefore shed light on both the worldwide *zeitgeist* and some cultural differences thereof. In this article a Japanologist elucidates some of these similarities and differences so that Western educators may develop new perspectives on familiar issues along with a broader outlook on human possibilities.

Contentious issues in North America--such as core liberal arts requirements vs. vocationalization of higher education, the student as customer, or faculty treatment in terms of promotion and tenure--are debated in Japan. That such issues are hotly contested shows first of all that Japan is not a monolith. But as to where the debates occur, most are behind closed doors at faculty meetings and in government ministries. When unresolved issues spill over into the mass media, it shows that the vaunted consensus [1] could not be reached, and that the contending parties are appealing to social mores to strengthen their own position as against that of their opponents.

At the curricular level, general liberal arts education in Japan has been in decline relative to specialized studies. Scientific and technical fields have been indigenized in the Japanese language and touted as advantageous to the breadwinning male Japanese identity. Whereas the liberal arts have not taken root in Japan but hark to Western sources, to the neglect of indigenous arts and literature that would merit inclusion in any liberal arts curriculum. Thus, in response to the desire of universities to offer more subjects in the majors that students choose when matriculating, combined with the low estate of general education courses, in the early 1990s the Ministry of Education loosened the regulations that had tended to maintain Western-style core liberal arts requirements, including English and other foreign languages.

Government control of education, not left to peer accreditation and so forth, is the norm in non-Western countries. Career bureaucrats think that they know better than people at the local level, and they have more power than elected politicians to enforce their viewpoint. The Ministry of Education is proud of the high average achievement through secondary school nationwide, and of the role that their standard national curriculum has
played in bringing relative prosperity to the vast majority in Japan. Higher education has not fared so well by international standards, but since most colleges are for profit, government regulations can mitigate ruthless business practices in colleges to some extent. The copious yearly self-evaluation forms, whose categories show the importance of academic accomplishments, also place productive pressure on many otherwise insular and complacent faculty members with tenure from the start.

This government influence is usually not direct and absolutistic, but affects funding, accreditation of new programs and so forth in subtle ways. There was thus a varied response among colleges to the license to change liberal arts requirements, with an overall trend to gradually replace some of them with specialized subjects.

Then the crime of the century by civilians in Japan unfolded with grisly revelations that Aum cult operatives were highly educated scientists, technicians and doctors. Academics could not run for cover, and fingers pointed to the vocationalization of universities to account for the inhuman behavior by their charges. An editorial in the vernacular _Asahi_ newspaper stated [2] that "our society has been shaken (Yamagishi, 1995, p. 9). [W]as not last year's curriculum reform action [by the Ministry of Education] regressive? ... For the sake of deepening the understanding of true natural science, of society and humanity, we should like colleges to rise up and think anew about liberal arts education."

A critique of vocationalization thus surfaced in this national daily with a circulation of 8.5 million, implicating those with power over university education, who must then search their consciences for culpability in the shocking misuse of science or else reflect on the value of the liberal arts. A few months later the Ministry of Education did issue a terse announcement offering financial incentives to colleges that bolster their liberal arts curriculum. But no further details have been forthcoming since then, showing that the press release served merely to appease public criticism.

Not unrelated to the vocationalization of higher education is the notion of the student as a customer. The Aum incident may have put a damper on this concept as well, for it has not been debated much outside of Academia. A department head at my college cheerily advocates the "merchandising" of the college as his contribution to healthy enrollments. 

For the debate is driven by demographics, the decline in birthrates that is drastically reducing the number reaching college age. The context of the debate is actually the increasing regional competition among post-secondary institutions.

At one of our faculty meetings, everyone received an article that criticized the "salaryman" type of professor who does the minimum for the students in what ought to be a service profession. However, this was only one in a never-ending series of pressure tactics by the college proprietors to squeeze the most work out of the faculty in face of declining enrollments. It is not a philosophical debate but sheer pragmatism at work.

Academic standards and faculty treatment also seem to be subject to the politics of economics. Even in U.S. colleges, what can account for the escalating expectations of faculty members in recent decades for good teaching evaluations and professional development along with publications and quantified community service, even while
working conditions have generally deteriorated? [3] In Japan as well, current moves toward the elimination of tenure and layoffs even at national universities represent a rationalization for economic reasons due to declining enrollments. Colleges can evidently maintain academic standards only at the level they can afford, with less financial support meaning more politicization and less academic freedom. If this also possible in the U.S., then scholars need to network as much as possible and to articulate our mission in society.

Endnotes

1. Maher and Yashiro (1995, p. 8) argue that the "ideology of social uniformity" and "harmony" is an "invented tradition." That is, the monolingual and monocultural state is not an aspect of Japanese culture _per se_ but begins in 1868 with the Meiji Period as a modern instrument of socio-political control.


3. A Teaching in the Community Colleges List discussion of tenure, promotion and academic standards in the U.S. and Japan has been edited and posted with commentary on the Web as a sort of 'metalink' expanding this article into two media. There are also online sources for further reading and instructions on how to join the dialogue (see McCarty, 1997).

References


McCarty, S. (1997, June 23). Faculty Treatment in the U.S. and Japan: 'Metalink' from a Print Journal. Online College Classroom List [E-mail discussion list message Webbed by hypernews].