DISCUSSION

Kenneth A. Feldman, State University of New York at Stony Brook

The papers that have just been presented ("New Directions in the Study of College Impact on Students") vary with respect to such matters as methodological sophistication, the extent to which data are presented, the kinds of theory underlying the data presentation, and so forth. Yet they are alike in one respect: they all make distinctive contributions to the study of college impacts, and in this sense each of them represents a "new" direction. Thus my remarks intentionally are appreciative in tone. I shall discuss the papers in an order different from that of their presentation.

David Kamens ("Size of College and Its 'Charter' as Determinants of College Effects") makes no methodological breakthroughs in his study--his technique of analysis is to compare percentages--but he does offer important theoretical and conceptual contributions. In effect, the typical college impact study conceives of the college as a more or less self-contained unit, as an environment unto itself. Kamens points out the need to probe past this point of view, to look for the relationship of a college to the wider social order of which it is a part. Indeed, the way in which the college is related to the larger social structure can and does have impacts on students quite apart from the effects of its internal environments.

Kamens' framing of his problem and his analysis of colleges clearly manifests a sociological approach to the study of college impacts--as, to some extent, does his choice of dependent variables (shifts in occupational commitment and commitment to the college). On the other hand, Arthur Chickering ("The Multi-Directionality of Student Change") is a psychologist (or, more correctly, a social psychologist). He is interested in explaining student changes in personality traits. Like Kamens, he takes a multi-institutional approach. He offers a variety of interesting analyses: (1) he finds out which particular scale items show high change across colleges; (2) he discusses the importance of comparing standard deviations of college classes (freshmen and seniors) as well as average scale scores; (3) he demonstrates how average change scores can camouflage the direction and amount of individual change; (4) he controls for initial position on the variable for which change is being measured. None of these procedures are world-shaking in themselves in any absolute sense. But they are so seldom done in the research on college students that they add up to a definite methodological contribution.

Chickering notes that student self-selection and college admissions practices operate in such a way that certain kinds of students tend to enter certain kinds of colleges. One implication of this is that differential changes by students in different colleges may be due to the personality and background differences of the students rather than to the environmental differences of the colleges. Chickering does not control or adjust for this non-random distribution of students among the colleges he studied. Alternately put, he does not deal with the multicollinearity of student input and environmental variables. It is in fact not easy to do so. Assessing the differential nature and amount of the impacts on students of different college environments--while at the same time taking into consideration the background, attitudinal, and personality differences among students within and between colleges--has turned out to be a particularly vexing assignment for researchers interested in the effects of higher education.

John Creager ("Statistical Models for Assessment of College Impacts") has presented a number of methods and models that have been suggested and are currently being used to handle this distinctive challenge in assessing college impacts. I think he has been particularly adept in comparing and contrasting these methods and in pointing out the advantages, disadvantages, and problems with each of them. He has been somewhat too modest about the model he himself has helped to develop--namely, the orthogonal decomposition of composite variance--which promises to be very useful.

Charles Bidwell ("The Use of Path Analysis in the Study of College Impacts"), in his study of Harvard students, is actually applying one of the methods reviewed by Creager: path analysis. Indeed, to the best of my knowledge, the efforts of Bidwell and his associate, Rebecca Vreeland, represent the first large-scale and systematic use of path analysis in the study of college impacts. As such, they are helping to answer some of Creager's questions and uncertainties about the method and its applicability.