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HIGHER EDUCATION: ACCESS AND EXCELLENCE

Remarks of

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U.S. Commissioner of Education

at

Founders' Day Celebration

Ohio University

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Introduction

President Ping and distinguished guests --

I'm delighted to participate in the 175th birthday celebration of this outstanding institution.

Ohio University is a unique blend of scholarship and service, and I'm convinced it will continue to offer unique service to this region -- and the world -- in the century ahead.

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The nature of that world will differ strongly from the past.

Daniel J. Boorstin, in Democracy and Its Discontents, entitled the final chapter of his book "Getting There Is All the Fun."

That statement seems to capture the higher education mood.

- o During the past 20 years we've moved from a selective higher education system to a sprawling enterprise.

- o It hasn't been all fun, of course, but at least we were kept very, very busy.

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Now, after two decades of breathless growth, some say we're running out of gas.

- o Enrollments have begun to level off.
Building new facilities has declined.
- o And we're not quite sure what has happened to something we vaguely have identified as "academic standards."

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Early Elitist Tendencies

The truth is that higher learning in America was quite selective for many years.

- o Students in colleges were nearly all children of wealth -- sons of merchants, shipbuilders, magistrates, lawyers, gentleman farmers, and, above all, ministers.
- o Only about 10% came from the homes of poor farmers, servants, or seamen.

For more than two hundred years the percentage of high school graduates going on to higher education crept up very slowly.

By 1900 it reached 36% -- and then plateaued for over 40 years. But this 36% represented about 10% of the age cohort. Clearly higher education was the exception and not the rule in America.

Federal Policy Intervention: From Elite to Mass Higher Education

Today, of course, all this has changed.

After World War II -- sparked largely by the Federally funded G.I. Bill -- enrollments took a quantum leap ahead.

- o Some 2,230,000 veterans -- many of them first generation college students -- came to campus
- o And from 1940 to 1960 American higher education enrollment doubled, from 1.5 to 3.2 million.

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As more and more people went to college, more and more people wanted to go and American higher education, quite literally, confronted an explosion of rising expectations.

Langston Hughes in his poem "Dream Deferred" asks rhetorically --

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

Like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore...

Or does it explode?

Colleges and universities from coast to coast -- often torn between turmoil, tradition, and social conscience -- aggressively recruited minority and low income students. The Congress -- in time -- responded to this social revolution. In 1972 a Basic Grant program was opened which gave Federal "scholarships" to needy students.

Higher education in America had -- in fact -- become not just a privilege but a "right".

- o A \$6 billion student assistance program has been approved by Congress.
- o And public policy now declares -- de facto if not de jure -- that no eligible student should be denied access to higher education because of social or economic barriers.

And higher education enrollment took another leap ahead.

- o From 1960 to 1977 enrollment increased from 3.2 to 11.4 million.
- o and even more significantly, the percentage of minority students in higher education increased from 7% to 17.5% in just 15 years.

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Education As A Right

Since World War II the university has -- in short -- become a prime distributor of rewards, and the university is a principle means by which upward mobility is achieved.

The university has of course always conveyed rewards.

- o It's just that, as more and more people are involved, participating in the reward becomes more and more essential.

Winning the Access Battle

This brings me to my central point. I believe the access battle has been largely won.

Almost all qualified students who want to go to college can find a place -- somewhere in the system.

And a very generous Federal assistance program has largely overcome the cost barriers as well.

On the other hand, adult enrollments will continue to expand.

America is growing older. By the year 2000 the number of adults over 21 years of age will increase from 64% to 73%

- o In response, the academy is shifting both its content and its calendar to pull the older students back to campus.
- o In 1975, 17 million persons participated in adult education, 4 million more than in 1969.
- o And I'm convinced this pattern will persist.

I suspect non-traditional institutions will also continue to expand -- to serve many of the young people who do not go on to formal education.

- o Today, American business and industry are spending between 40 and 50 billion dollars a year on "in-company" training.

And during the next 10 years many high school graduates will in fact take special non-collegiate courses or enroll in short term training programs -- either on or off the job.

Last night I heard that in the Greater Boston area there are over 120 postsecondary institutions and as the youth population continues to decline the "non-collegiate" schools may, in fact, compete with more traditional higher learning institutions.

The open university reflects the fact that knowledge has expanded, work has become more complicated, and more education for more people is absolutely crucial.

- o Just as secondary education with 12 years of schooling was pushed 100 years ago, so it is that 14 or more years of formal education seems not unreasonable for those about to enter century 21.
- o The expanded university also reflects the fact that education has become a status symbol and to be excluded is viewed as a discriminatory act.
- o It also recognizes that there is no God-given cut-off line where the gifted and the non-gifted are arbitrarily split apart and that our selection practices are still more art than science.
- o The expanded university also accepts the rather brash assumption that openness and excellence in higher education are, in fact, not contradictions.

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In the spirit of this celebration, I should like to pick up that final note -- openness and excellence -- and in the remaining moments focus on priorities for the 1980's.

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First, I believe that with all our diversity higher education must still focus on something called the common core.

In the early days American higher education was more or less cohesive.

- * The production of a learned ministry, the creation of a professional class, the passing on of eternal verities -- these were for-years the goals of Harvard College and of hundreds of imitative institutions.

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The elective system came along, but this did not remove our notion of a common academic core.

During the 20th century American higher education, like America itself, was shaken by war, the crash, the alienation of modern life, the erosion of faith and religion and even rationality.

- * But, with it all, colleges still accepted some notion of coherence, albeit a pale afterglow of the vivid puritan commitment.

This common heritage notion was, however, sharply challenged in the 1960's as we admitted students from all social and economic groups. On campus after campus

- * Diversity -- not conformity -- was the new ideology to be worshipped.
- * Many students, often joined by faculty, viewed as "cultural imperialism" any attempt intellectually

to unite Chicanos, native Americans, blacks,
New York Jews, San Francisco WASPs, oriental
immigrants, ghetto kids, and fundamentalists.

- * Traditional requirements often were attacked
and toppled while new values were aggressively
affirmed.

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An anecdote from Stanford University is instructive. After having
dropped almost all requirements in the 60's a faculty committee pro-
posed -- in 1976 -- a required course in western culture.

The student newspaper in a biting attack on the proposition said
the new report

proposes to remove from students the right to choose
for themselves a course... This is not to deny that
courses in western culture are valuable and that
most persons could benefit from them. To require
them to take them, however, carries a strong
illiberal connotation... It imposes a uniform
standard on nonuniform people.

Conventional wisdom had it that all intellectual and cultural con-
nections among students had been snapped.

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Today, I believe the curriculum pendulum is swinging back again --
and out of our confusion I happen to believe a new, more authentic
cohesion will emerge.

- * There is of course a danger. Students must be
free to follow thier own interests, to develop

there own aptitudes, and to pursue their own goals.

- * On this liberty no one must trespass; this is why colleges have academic majors and electives.
- * And yet we are beginning to reaffirm that truly educated persons must move beyond themselves in relation to other peoples and times, understand how their origins and wants and needs are tied to the origins and wants and needs of others.

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We are beginning to recognize that to suggest that students have nothing in common is just as flawed as to suggest that all students are alike.

John R. Davis, in writing about our current quest, said that behind our

search for standards is a more fundamental search for purpose. The confusion about standards and the emerging pluralism in higher education are symptoms of a quest for new formulations of purpose. What may emerge, along with the emerging pluralism, is a new concept of liberal education. Unlike traditional liberal education, rooted as it was in concepts of mental discipline and transfer of training, liberal education for the decade ahead will increasingly use... contemporary problems of society as the medium of education.

In my own book Educating for Survival, Marty Kaplan and I have also discussed themes of "commonness" which focus on our common heritage,

on contemporary institutions and on prospects for the future which we believe justify consideration.

In any event, I suggest that the general education pattern in America, which had reduced itself to something called "distribution requirements," had for all practical purposes lost its intellectual soul. It was all but bankrupt -- and the students knew it.

The irreverent confrontations of the 60's shook the skeletons, broke some bones, but I suggest that out of that assault a new, more authentic notion of liberal education may emerge.

Second, higher education must build a better bridge toward the world of learning and the world of work.

Third, higher education must serve a different kind of student.

Finally, mass higher education must strengthen research and scholarship, the sine qua non of academic excellence.

Trow, in his brilliant essay on "The Transition from Mass to Universal Higher Education," comments on what he calls the autonomous and the popular functions of the university. The autonomous functions include:

- * the transmission of high culture, the creation of new knowledge, and the formation, selection,
- * and certification of elite groups, the learned professions, the civil servants.

The popular or mass functions on the other hand flow more directly from the university as a redistributor of privilege and the provision of "useful knowledge" to many social groups and institutions.

Trow suggests that the big State universities in America -- many are our most distinguished institutions -- have increasingly been performing both autonomous and popular functions, trying to keep the functions insulated from each other through graduate and undergraduate schools and academic departments. He insists that we must protect the highly vulnerable autonomous functions of liberal education and basic research and scholarship from the direct impact of the larger society.

Trow also observes that the autonomous functions of the university are being threatened.

Constituencies, he argues, have become much wider, more heterogeneous, and less familiar.

- * Governing bodies must now negotiate conflicting values,
- * and they are inclined to respond to the fear and anger of the many publics. The fit between an expanding university and the tradition of scholarship is very awkward.

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Trow's analysis is as usual absolutely valid. The tensions within these institutions that try to be both traditional and popular are very real.

Because of Federal support the research function has been independently sustained.

- * Professor Joseph Ben-David, in his excellent book on American Higher Education, carefully

traces the emergence of mission oriented research, noting that the Federal role is absolutely crucial.

- * Since 1940 the Federal support of university research and development has increased from \$8 million to an estimated \$5.4 billion in 1977.
- * Federal R&D support has had its ups and downs, but I believe it will hold its own and even rise since the urgent social problems which depend on research will persist and grow increasingly complex.

I believe the Federal Government has a special role to see to it that the scholarly functions are sustained.

(LEAVE SPACE TO DISCUSS RESEARCH LIBRARY PROGRAMS)

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Dr. Lewis Thomas -- author of Lives of a Cell and a trustee of the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center -- said recently at a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science that these are not the best of times for the human mind.

"All sorts of things seem to be turning out wrong," he said . . .

and the century seems to be slipping through our fingers here at the end, with almost all promises unfilled. I cannot begin to guess at all the causes of our cultural sadness, not even the most important ones, but I can think of one thing that is wrong with us and eats away at us: We do not know enough about ourselves.

We are ignorant about how we work, about where we fit in, and most of all about the enormous, imponderable system of life in which we are embedded as working parts.... it is a new experience for all of us. It's unfamiliar ground.

As the agenda of interdependence grows more urgent, whether on matters of fuel or environment or population or food or health, I believe the university will be called upon to search for plausible answers to our problems and hopefully sustain free inquiry wherever it may lead.

Conclusion

What are we to conclude from all this?

Well, as I look ahead higher education in America faces stress and the pressures of the 1980's will be even more intense.

Enrollments will decline, budget will be hit and the university will compete with other social needs.

At the same time, we've gone through a traumatic period, we've survived, and several lessons might be learned.

First -- Increasing access to higher education is I suspect inevitable. Education and social progress are inextricably tied together, and any policy that seeks arbitrarily to limit education beyond high school will not be sustained.

Second -- Universal higher education does in fact have limits. A significant percentage of students for a variety of reasons will not go on to traditional higher education institutions.

Third -- As higher education became more open than selective, the focus will be on the performance of the institution as well as the capacity of the student.

Fourth -- A diversified system of higher education is required to serve a diversified group of students.

The separate missions of the university must be clearly indicated and mobility within the system assured.

Fifth -- Even among diverse student groups some commonality can remain, and a new kind of liberal education can be intellectually pursued.

Sixth -- The research mission of the university can be preserved, and enhanced, by the growth and richness of the larger academic community. Further, as the Earth's problems grow more intense, the university will be looked to to sustain both basic and applied research.

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Finally, I suggest -- for the consideration of this most distinguished body -- that expanding enrollments can strengthen, not diminish, the quality of higher education.

Our challenge is to find appropriate ways to link social justice and the intellectual quest, not as an act of weak surrender but of deep conviction. That human potential -- wherever it is found -- is a most important resource.

It's just that very often our definition of the "college student" is too limited.

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