

Talking Points

Dr. Boyer's Remarks
to American Association
for Higher Education

April 16, 1979

I sincerely appreciate your generous words. I'm especially pleased to be honored with colleagues as distinguished as Juanita Kreps and Patricia Graham. While I feel like a thorn between two roses, it's exhilarating to share in such a tribute with American beauties we have all learned to prize for their intellect, their wit, and their remarkable contributions to education and public life.

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I congratulate AAHE on its 10th anniversary. In one short decade you have made real contributions toward improving the efficiency and image of higher education, and I'm sure your work will have even greater impact as you go along.

The conference theme -- "The Academic Workforce: Opportunities for Professional Renewal" -- suggests a related theme for my brief remarks.

That theme is the renewal of self-reliance, of ingenuity and resourcefulness, of commitment to the welfare of others that seems to well up in the American psyche in times of stress. This phenomenon occurs among educators, as well as among public and civic leaders.

We have only to look at the tremendous challenge faced by higher education after World War II. In a matter of months, higher education was asked to expand curriculum offerings and physical facilities to accommodate veterans entering college under the GI bill -- ultimately 2 million of them. Critics said it couldn't be done. Higher education did it -- with flying colors.

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Higher education, I think we agree, is in for equally challenging times. Though, if you'll forgive the pun, this will be a close encounter of a different kind.

-- Student enrollments will continue to decline as the pool of college-age young people declines through the 1990s.

-- Parents increasingly question the value of a college education when the cost threatens the family's very financial future.

Without financial aid, parents sending four children through college face costs approximating \$100,000. That's an unprecedented financial commitment when the quality of the product is in question.

-- Caught like other institutions in the inflationary spiral, colleges and universities will have to tighten their belts and make every dollar count.

These conditions call for a re-examination of the purpose of higher education. Also a renewal of our commitment to academic excellence and academic relevance to the needs of the real world.

Harvard leads in returning to a core curriculum that offers students the essential intellectual and problem-solving skills--skills that were somehow waylaid on campuses during the turbulent 60s.

Whatever your responsibilities in the academic community -- as college president, dean, department head, full professor, or graduate instructor -- I hope you will re-examine the content and quality of your programs.

Are programs relevant to student needs in the 1980s? Are they rigorous?
Do they challenge students to excel?
Do they challenge you to excel?

Student populations will continue to change. Minorities, women, handicapped people, and mature adults will press for equal access to undergraduate and professional schools.

Are you prepared to go an extra mile to help these students? To give them tutorial help and career guidance? To encourage them to excel despite learning problems or physical handicap?

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Student financial aid will continue to be the cornerstone of federal education policy.

-- The Carter administration has pledged in the 1980 budget request to fund all eligible applicants under the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant program. Still, we expect a saving of \$156 million in the BEOG program by cutting down on fraud and waste.

-- We are tightening procedures to collect defaulted student loans. In the last year, the default rate for the Guaranteed Student Loan Program, which is administered by my office, has dropped from nearly 14 percent to 10 percent.

In fiscal year 1978 we collected \$15.8 million in defaulted loans. In the first five months of fiscal 1979 we collected \$13.7 million.

Problems with the National Direct Student Loan Program, operated by colleges and universities, are more serious. The default rate has climbed more than 17 percent in the last year to an outstanding indebtedness of \$700 million.

We have taken several steps to deal with the situation.

-- We have asked colleges and schools to assign to the federal government the collection of debts in default for more than two years.

-- We are reducing the amount of money going to schools with very high default rates and no sign of improvement.

-- I am having my staff develop performance standards for the 1980-81 academic year to help colleges and schools reduce default rates. Under proposed rules, schools not meeting these standards will receive no additional loan funds.

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Historian Carl Lotus Becker advised during the depths of the the Great Depression:

Economic distress will teach men,
if anything can, that realities are less
dangerous than fantasies, that fact-finding
is more effective than fault-finding.

Even earlier, Philander Johnson penned this perceptive couplet:

The world would sleep if things were run
By men who say, "It can't be done."

My point is this: Higher education confronts three major challenges -- the quest for academic excellence, equal access for all qualified students, and the need for efficient management to contain costs.

We need to face economic realities. Above all, we need to believe heart and soul in quality education as the engine that drives this nation.

Throughout our history higher education has said "It can be done," and has done it.

That determination remains the constant in the equation before us.

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