

DRAFT (9/17/81)

A QUEST FOR COMMON LEARNING

Remarks by:

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Delivered at:

Association of Presidents of  
Puerto Rican Universities  
Conference on General Education  
Condado Beach Hotel  
San Juan, Puerto Rico

September 24, 1981

In 1693 the King and Queen of England granted their first royal charter to a college in the new world.

This fledging institution--the College of William and Mary--had a very clear notion of what it was supposed to do.

- o According to the charter the College was to train the ministry, provide pious education in "good Letters and Manners," and finally the college was to convert the Indians.
- o To achieve those noble ends, a common curriculum was established--starting with Latin and Greek; moving on to "Rhetorick, Logick, Ethicks, Physicks, Metaphysicks, and Mathematicks;" and concluding with Scriptures and Hebrew.

The William and Mary curriculum was rigidly prescribed, and promotion from one tier of courses to the next was strictly monitored.

As the William and Mary statutes of 1727 put it, "Let no Blockhead or lazy Fellow in his Studies be elected."

Every core curriculum of the past was guided by a vision of coherence.

The classical curriculum that prevailed from the founding of William and Mary to the Revolution was based on the notion of

- o a shared social structure,
- o a communal view as to how all young minds should be trained,
- o and a common belief in God, an afterlife, the church, and the "rights" and "wrongs" that should govern life.

The modest, general education reforms from the Revolution to the Civil War did not challenge coherence. They reinforced it. Science and technology and modern history were added to the rigid and required curriculum because the society's self-image had expanded, not frgmented.

And paradoxically the race toward "free electives" which followed was in its own way rooted in "commonality." But what was "common" was the freedom of self-determination; what was "shared" was the right to be autonomous and unique.

Radical individualism offered a more powerful and accurate image of the times than the earlier alternatives.

Today we seem more confident of the length of a college education than we do about its substance.

On many campuses, required courses have been dropped, and the ones which remain reveal a staggering incoherence of purpose, often expressed as "distribution requirements."

I happen to believe that students must be free to follow their own interests, to develop their own aptitudes, and to pursue their own goals.

But I also believe that it is as wrong to suggest to students that they have nothing in common, as it is to suggest that they are all alike.

- o And to be truly educated students they
- o must move beyond themselves,
- o must gain social perspectives,
- o must see themselves in relation to other people and times.

There is, of course, no single combination of courses to capture the essence of our oneness. But in the remaining moments I'd like to suggest six themes that illustrate the point I have in mind.

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First, we are all engaged in the sending and receiving of messages.

- o Language is what makes us a unique species, and all students should be required to master the written and spoken word.

- o They should understand how we use and misuse symbols, how we communicate not just with words, but also with mathematics and music and computers and dance.

Courses in communication should strive for "comprehensive literacy"--the ability to spot the hidden suppositions behind a message.

- o Students should, for example, learn how to deal critically with advertising and propaganda.

Students should explore, as well, how we communicate nonverbally, through music, dance, and the visual arts.

- o They should understand how these forms of expression convey subtle meanings, express intense emotions, and how, uniquely, the arts can stir a deep response in others.

- o Linda Bove - Robert Frost

The point is this. The mastery of language is essential if students are to survive in a world

- o where we live by symbols,
- o and where language provides the foundation for all further learning.

Second, students should understand that we are all caught up in a world of social institutions.

- o We are born into institutions, we pose much of our lives in institutions, and we as institutions, are involved when we die and when we are buried.

- o We are tied into schools and banks and towns and health plans and clubs, into the entire structure of contemporary life.

No education has done its job if it does not clarify for students how these structures came to be and where they fit into the broader social context.

The guiding logic here is to recognize our common membership in our social structures,

- o to clarify their functions,
- o and to understand how organizations can and should be changed in light of changing social needs.

Third, all students should understand that we all work and that we all depend on the work of others.

We hear a lot of talk these days about "liberal versus vocational" education, and it is suggested that our collegiate traditions are demeaned if they lead directly to a job.

- o Such a view not only distorts the present; it also denies the past.
- o Education has always been a blend of inspiration and utility.

#### C. P. Snow - The Masters

We all work and yet because of tradition, lethargy, ignorance, and snobbery, mindless distinctions are made between what is vocationally legitimate and illegitimate.

- o It is all right, some say, to prepare to be a doctor, but it is less all right to be a nurse.
- o It is all right to be an engineer, but to be a computer programmer is off limits.
- o Teaching college is just great, but teaching elementary school is something else again.
- o To dig the ruins of the past is a respectable objective, but to work with ruined lives in an urban jungle--a much more demanding task--is not so worthy.
- o To read what has been written in the past is fine, but to aspire to write about the present--as a journalist perhaps--is not quite legitimate at many arts and science colleges.

What logic is used by those who make distinctions such as these, by those who--through the curriculum they offer--determine for their students which work is honorable and which is not?

I believe schools and colleges should be places where students come to understand that, for most of us, work is an expression of who we are and where we fit. "I work, therefore, I am" may overstate the case, but it speaks to our current condition.

Fourth, all students should study our shared relationship with nature.

All life forms on the planet earth are inextricably interlocked, and no education is complete without an understanding of the ordered, interdependent nature of the universe. As Lewis Thomas, in his Phi Beta Kappa Oration at Harvard University, reminded us:

There are no solitary, free-living creatures:  
Every form of life is dependent on other forms.  
The great successes in evolution, the mutants who have, so to speak, made it, have done so by fitting in with, and sustaining, the rest of life. Up to now we might be counted among the brilliant successes, but flashy and perhaps unstable. We should go warily into the future, looking for ways to be more useful, listening more carefully for the signals, watching our step, and having an eye out for partners.

General education means learning about the elegant, underlying patterns of the natural world and discovering that all elements of nature, in some manner, are related to each other.

Fifth, we all have a shared sense of time and all students should learn about what Edmund Burke called the pact between the dead, the living and the yet unborn.

- o Obviously, to talk about our heritage has a familiar ring.
- o But if our schools and colleges do not help keep the past alive, we will not only have lost our past, we will have lost our future, too.

Here I should insert a word of caution.

It is not enough to be told that events have occurred, ideas have been thought, and people have been born and have died. Or that great literature has been written--as important as this heritage may be.

- o The successful approach will always ask of the events of the past that have to do with us today.

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I am, in short, proposing universal learning that

- o not only looks at the heritage we share,
- o and not only reflects on fundamental common experiences of the present,
- o but also focuses on those alternatives for the future that in a thousand separate and unsuspected ways are being shaped today.

Such a core course would spend some time looking at the "history of the future."

In many ways societies are held together by their images of the future. It is important to consider the images that earlier cultures have possessed, as well as to look more closely at utopian literature, science, fiction, scripture, millenarian tracts, and other sources of such images.

- o Tensions over resources grow more acute, and the quality of our environment is threatened.

And here are the questions we confront:

- o Where will we get our food, and how can it be appropriately distributed?
- o What about our energy supply, and how can it be equitably shared?
- o How can we reduce the poisons in the atmosphere?
- o Can we have a proper balance between population and the life-support system of this planet?
- o How can we live together, with civility, in a climate of constraint? These are a few of the transcendent issues that today's young people must begin to think about with great care.

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One final word.

- o Who are the social prophets of our time?
- o What images of the future does our society possess?

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- o What are its central dogmas,
- o and how do these compare with the forecasts offered by the emerging profession of futurology?
- o How does the process of policy planning translate future alternatives into current choices?

These questions, too, deserve a place in the experience of every undergraduate.

Finally, all students should explore our shared values and beliefs.

We are at a pivotal time in human history, and educators must approach their responsibilities with a sense of confidence and of urgency.

- o The human race continues to expand at a rate of 200,000 people a day, or 73 million more people every year.
- o And every day more than 800 million people face gnawing hunger, living literally from hand to mouth.

We recognize that the barriers to general education are formidable. Departmental turf is jealously protected. Faculty members who devote themselves to general education run the risk of losing touch with their disciplines, and frequently they are not rewarded for their effort at tenure and promotion time.

And yet, without being unduly optimistic, I believe there are important changes in the wind.

- o The contours of the disciplines are changing.
- o New academic alliances are being formed.
- o Sociologists, psychologists, biologists, and chemists find themselves seeking answers to the same, or closely related questions.
- o More than at any time in our memory, researchers feel the need to communicate with colleagues in other fields.

This more integrated view of knowledge will, I believe, create a climate favorable to general education in the nation's colleges and schools.

And I believe it is our obligation as college leaders to help lead the way.

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 times for the human mind.

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

Just think, two centuries ago we could explain everything about everything, out of pure reason, and now most of that elaborate and harmonious structure has come apart before our eyes.

We are dumb.

Dr. Thomas's appeal is an eloquent one:

- o it is a plea for more perspective.
- o and it begins by searching for more knowledge about ourselves--where we come from, how we work, where we fit in, and where we want to go.

If this century does not slip forever through our fingers, it will be because learning--and especially our schools and colleges--will have directed us away from our splintered dumbness, and will have helped us focus together on our common goals.

This--it seems to me--is both the rationale and the urgency of the common core.

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