

**TEACHING IN AMERICA**

**Remarks by  
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the Advancement of Teaching**

**The Dedication of  
The Richard and Edna Salmon  
Center for Teaching**

**Brown University  
Providence, Rhode Island**

**May 6, 1989**

## INTRODUCTION

**I'm delighted to participate in the dedication of The Richard and Edna Salmon Center for Teaching.**

**The renovation of this historic building--at the very heart of this enormously impressive campus--reaffirms the commitment of this outstanding institution to undergraduate education and to excellence in teaching.**

**And again, I'm deeply honored to be with you today.**

**Since 1985 we at the Carnegie Foundation have been looking at the undergraduate experience in the United States. During this study we surveyed 5,000 faculty and 5,000 students. We traveled to campuses from Maine to California. And we spent thousands of hours**

- visiting classes**
- eating in the cafeteria**
- talking with administrators, faculty, and students.**

**Throughout this study we were struck time and time again**

- 1. by the great diversity of American higher education,**
- 2. by its openness to ideas, and**
- 3. by the intellectual freedom on the campus which we should never take for granted.**

**And we concluded--in the Carnegie Report--that the American system of higher learning is, in fact, the envy of the world.**

**At the same time, during our study, we found points of tension on the campus--especially regarding the undergraduate experience.**

- And this morning--at the dedication of this elegant Center for Teaching and Learning--I'd like to focus on 4 priorities that must be vigorously pursued,**
- if we are to achieve excellence in collegiate education and--most especially--affirm the centrality of teaching.**

## I. LANGUAGE

**We begin the Carnegie Report by giving top priority to language.**

**We insist that the most essential goal of the undergraduate experience is to help all students**

- **think critically, and**
- **become proficient in the written and the spoken word.**

**When I was a small boy, 100 years ago, we used to say**

- **sticks and stones may break our bones, but names will never hurt you.**
- **What nonsense!**
- **I'd usually say this with tears running down my cheeks, thinking all the time, "hit me with a stick, but for goodness sake, stop those words that penetrate so deeply and hurt so long.**

**I'm suggesting that**

- **Our sophisticated use of symbols sets human beings apart from all other forms of life--the porpoise and the bumble bee, notwithstanding.**
- **And that it's through this miracle of language that we are connected to each other.**

**Consider the miracle of this very moment.**

- **I stand here vibrating my vocal chords.**
- **Molecules go "skittering" in your direction.**
- **They touch your tympanic membrane.**
- **Signals go scurrying up your 8th cranial nerve.**
- **And there is a response deep in your cerebrum that approximates, I trust, the images of mine.**

**What an audacious act--**

- **This majestic use of symbols,**
- **which--like breath itself--we simply take for granted.**

**The problem is that too many students come to college linguistically unprepared.**

- **And 65% of the faculty we surveyed said they were teaching students the reading/writing and mathematic skills they should have learned in school.**

**It's for this reason that we recommend in the Carnegie Report that**

**All colleges should work with teachers in surrounding schools to improve the language proficiency of students.**

**We also recommend in the Carnegie Report that**

**All college freshmen complete a course in expository writing, since it's through clear thinking that clear writing can be taught.**

**And we urge that writing be a part of every class,  
from business and literature to science  
and mathematics--which increasingly is  
itself a universal language.**

**In our report we also suggest that all  
seniors--before they graduate from college--**

**be asked to write a paper on a consequential  
topic,**

**which frankly is the best college assessment  
instrument I know.**

**And then we make a rather brash proposal.**

- **We suggest that all colleges consider introducing a "Senior Colloquium Series" on campus--a "modern" version of the old-fashioned declaration--**
- **a project in which half-dozen members of the senior class would be asked to present their "final papers" in a public forum such as this.**
- **It even occurred to me--as a rather "pernicious" proposition--that the student speakers might be "selected randomly" from all members of the graduating class.**

**Let me state, then, my conviction quite directly.  
I'm convinced that if after 16 years of formal  
education--undergraduates**

- **Cannot write with clarity.**
- **Cannot read with understanding.**
- **Cannot communicate orally with  
precision.**

**Then we should close the college doors and start  
again!**

**Before leaving "language," I have one further observation.**

**Good communication means not just clarity of expression, it means integrity as well.**

- **And--during college--students must learn--not just to speak honestly, but to listen, too.**

**The problem is that we scurry about too fast and we're so much in the thick and thin of things, that we fail to communicate authentically with each other.**

**While Chancellor of the State University of New York, I was about to speak to faculty from across the state when several hundred students**

- **moved in with placards,**
- **chanting slogans,**
- **demanding that I help free a group of students who had been arrested on another campus.**
- **The microphone was grabbed and for almost an hour, we went back and forth.**

**Finally, after an hour, I concluded we weren't listening to each other--slow learners.**

- **The meeting was in shambles. Even worse, I concluded I was talking not to people, but to a faceless mob.**

**I left the platform and walked into the crowd.**

- **I began talking to a single student.**
- **I asked her name.**
- **I asked about her family.**

**Soon several others joined us. To make a long story short, the session ended, a compromise was reached, and, in the process, I'd learned to know some most attractive students.**

**Wayne Booth of the University of Chicago has written that**

**All too often our efforts to speak and listen seem to be "vicious cycles" spiraling downward.**

**But Booth went on to say that we have all experienced moments**

- **when the spiral moves "upward"**
- **when one party's efforts--to speak and listen--a little bit better.**
- **produced a "similar response"**
- **making it possible to move on up the spiral to--what Booth describes as "moments of genuine understanding."**

**This then is the goal of the undergraduate experience.**

- **to teach students to think critically and to communicate with precision.**
- **But quality also means teaching students that language is a sacred trust.**
- **And that "truth" is the obligation we assume when we are empowered with the use of words.**

## II. CURRICULUM

**This brings me to priority number two.**

**In the Carnegie Report, we say that**

- **Beyond proficiency in language,**
- **All students should complete a core curriculum to put their learning in perspective**

**In 1972, I was sitting in my office in Albany, New York.**

**It was a dreary Monday morning and, to avoid the pressures of the day,**

**I turned instinctively to the stack of 3rd class mail I kept on the corner of my desk to create the illusion of being very, very busy--it's an old administrative trick.**

**On top of the heap was the student newspaper from the university in the west.**

**The headline announced that the faculty, in a burst of creativity, had introduced a required course in western civilization after abolishing all requirements three years before (1972).**

**The students--I discerned--were mightily offended by the faculty initiative and in a front page editorial declared that**

**a required course is an "illiberal act"**

**The editorial concluded by asking rhetorically:**

**How dare they impose "uniform standards" on "non-uniform people."**

**Frankly, I was startled by that statement.**

**I was startled that some of America's most gifted students, after fourteen or more years of formal education, still had not learned the simple truth that**

**while we are "non-uniform" we still have many things in common.**

**These students had not discovered the fundamental fact that while we are autonomous human beings, with our own aptitudes and interests, we are at the same time, deeply dependent on each other.**

**Today, almost all colleges in the United States have a requirement in general education to help students gain perspective.**

**But all too often**

**this so-called "distribution sequence" is "little more" than a "grab bag" of isolated credits.**

**Students complete their required courses--"get them out of the way"--is the way they put it.**

**But what they fail to see are connections that would give them**

- **a more coherent view of knowledge,**
- **and a more authentic, more integrated view of life.**

**Barbara McClintock--the Nobel Winning Geneticist--said on one occasion that "everything is one." "There is," she said, "no way to draw a line between things!"**

- **I wonder if Professor McClintock has looked at a college catalogue in recent days.**

**Frank Press--the President of the National Academy of Sciences--captured this same spirit when he recently suggested that the scientist is, in some respects, an artist, too.**

- **Dr. Press went on to observe that "the magnificent Double Helix--which broke the genetic code--was not only rational--it was beautiful as well.  
[CAPE KENNEDY]**

**And when the physicist Victor Weiskopf was asked, "What gives you hope in troubled times," he replied, "Mozart and Quantum Mechanics."**

**But where in the college curriculum do students discover connections such as these?**

**Today's students live in a world that is economically and ecologically connected.**

**And, yet,**

**I worry that education in this country is parochial at the very moment the human agenda is more global.**

**When I was United States Commissioner of Education, Joan Ganz Cooney who was the brilliant creator of Sesame Street came to see me one day.**

- **She wanted to start a new program in science for junior high school students.**
- **It subsequently was developed and its called 3-2-1 Contact.**

**In doing background research for the program, Children's Television Workshop, they asked junior high school students such questions as:**

- **"Where does water come from?" and a disturbing percentage said "the faucet."**

- **They asked, "Where does light come from?" and they said, the "switch."**
- **And "Where does garbage go?" "Down the chute."**

**I'm suggesting that--in an interdependent world--we need a curriculum which goes beyond the isolated facts and helps students put their learning in perspective.**

**More than 40 years ago, Mark Van Doren wrote that**

**the "Connectedness of Things" is what the Educator contemplates to the limit of his capacity.**

**Van Doren went on to observe that**

- **The student who can begin early in life to see things as connected has begun the life of learning.**

**This, it seems to me, is the goal of general education.**

### **III. TEACHING**

**This brings me to the central theme of my remarks today--**

**the Centrality of Teaching.**

**A college can give priority to language and have a curriculum with coherence.**

**But in the end it's the teacher in the classroom who**

- **integrates ideas,**
- **and inspires students to study on their own.**

**Several years ago I couldn't sleep. Instead of counting sheep I counted all the teachers I had had.**

**I remembered "rather vividly" fifteen or more--and I must confess that there were few nightmares in the bunch.**

**But I then thought about the great teachers,**

**the truly outstanding individuals--in college or in school--who had touched me or truly changed my life.**

**First, I thought about Miss Rice, my first grade teacher, who on the first day of school said**

- Good morning class. Today we learn to read.**
- It was Miss Rice who taught me that language and learning are inextricably connected.**

**I then recalled Mr. Wittingler, a high school history teacher, who one day asked to see me after class. As I passed his desk Mr. Wittingler said**

- **Ernest, you're doing very well. You keep this up and you'll get an A.**
- **That was the first time a teacher had said that to me directly. Suddenly I thought I just might be a student.**

**And I remembered Dr. Joseph Smith, a literature professor who loved to have us read Shakespeare aloud. Professor Smith laughed and cried--even though he had read King Lear and MacBeth a thousand times before.**

**I then asked myself what made these teachers truly great. Why did these three people stand out from all the rest? And three conditions came to mind:**

- **First, these great teachers were knowledgeable and informed. There was something there to teach.**
- **Second, these teachers communicated at a level students understand. That is, they can take their knowledge and connect it with the reality of their student's lives. They not only know their subject, they know children.**

**During research for High School, I visited a junior high school in New Haven, Connecticut and walked into a sixth-grade classroom, unannounced.**

**At first, I was appalled because thirty students had crammed up against the teacher's desk. I really thought the teacher was suffering some kind of physical abuse.**

**Then I observed that something truly remarkable was going on.**

**The students were crowding the desk, not in anger, but in enthusiastic engagement with the teacher.**

**They were reading through Charles Dickens' Oliver Twist together and discussing whether Oliver could survive successfully in New Haven. This teacher had brought the urban jungle of London to New Haven. They knew the good and the bad guys, and this brilliant teacher was not teaching nineteenth century literature, but was teaching life.**

- **But there is a third characteristic that comes to mind. Great teachers know their subject. They know their students. But the most inspiring teachers I have had were also open, authentic human beings. There was complete integrity in their lives and in addition to teaching the subject--as the cliché has it--they also taught themselves.**

**And I suspect that everyone in the audience today can remember at least one great teacher--like Miss Rice--who changed your life forever.**

**During our study of undergraduate education, we found outstanding teachers on every campus.**

**But I must tell you that we also found  
great "passivity" in the classroom**

**We found students**

- **eagerly taking notes,**
- **cramming for their finals.**

**And when they did speak out in class, the most frequent question asked was:**

- **"Will we have this on the test?"**

**What we need today are mentors who can inspire students**

- **to move from conformity to creativity,**
- **and learn to cooperate with each other, rather than compete--since most of the consequential problems of our time will be resolved only as we work together.**

**In American higher education, we must have quality research. But we need great teaching, too.**

**In the Carnegie Report we urge that the we stop talking about teaching versus research and start talking about what it means to be a scholar.**

- **We say that scholarship means, of course, the "discovery of new knowledge"--as in research.**
- **But we also conclude that scholarship means the "integration of knowledge"--it means the ability to put new ideas in larger context.**
- **We say that scholarship means the "application of knowledge"--as in the great land-grant tradition.**
- **And we conclude that scholarship, at its best, also means the "transmission of knowledge"--through great teaching in the classroom.**

**What we need on campus is a mosaic of talent--an arrangement in which all four dimensions of scholarship--discovery, integration, application, and transmission--are honored and rewarded.**

**At the 200th anniversary of Columbia University, Robert Oppenheimer argued vigorously that the role of the scholar is, in fact,**

**not complete,  
until he is engaged actively  
in teaching what he has observed.**

**Oppenheimer put the matter this way. He said that--**

- **it is "the proper role" of the scientist that he not merely find a new truth and communicate it to his fellows at large,**
- **but (it is also the role of the scientist) that he teach--**
- **that he try to bring the most honest and most intelligible account of new knowledge to all who will try to learn.**

**And this means teaching future scholars in the classroom.**

## **I'm suggesting**

- **if colleges do not recognize good teaching--**
- **if they do not reward those who spend time with students--**

**Then scholarship will decline and all the talk about excellence in education will be simply a diversion.**

#### IV. CAMPUS LIFE

Before closing, I'd like to say a word about the quality of campus life--

- since great teaching extend beyond the classroom, too.

Students come to college expecting something special.

And yet, during our study, we found that

- About 50% of today's students say they "feel like a number in a book."
- About 40% do not feel a sense of community on campus.
- And about 2/3 of today's students say they have no professor who is interested in their personal lives.

Today's undergraduates clearly cherish their independence and they're pleased that in loco parentis has finally been abolished.

**But undergraduates like the rest of us**

- **still want the guidance of great teachers.**

**One student captured this "ambivalence" when she said:**

- **we don't want the university to be involved in our lives,**
- **but we would like someone to be concerned occasionally about our lives.**

**In the award-winning Broadway play, Fiddler on the Roof, the peasant dairyman--who raised 5 daughters**

- **with considerable help from scriptural quotations,**
- **many of which he himself invented,**

**says that the things that make life tolerable to the hard working Jewish family are:**

- **the old laws,**
- **the old customs,**
- **and the feasts that are handed down  
from one generation to another.**

**Without these--the dairyman declares--life would  
be as shaky as a Fiddler on the Roof.**

**So it is with college. While professors teach and do research, and while students study on their own, life for most of us, is still made possible--**

- **by shared rituals and traditions,**
- **by informal learning outside the classroom,**
- **and by a sense of community on campus.**

## CONCLUSION

**Here, then, is my conclusion.**

**American higher education is the envy of the world.**

**But to effectively serve students--**

- **We must affirm both the centrality and integrity of language.**
- **We must have a curriculum with perspective.**
- **We must strengthen the spirit of community on campus.**
- **Also, and above all, we must give recognition to great teaching whose inspiration never ends.**