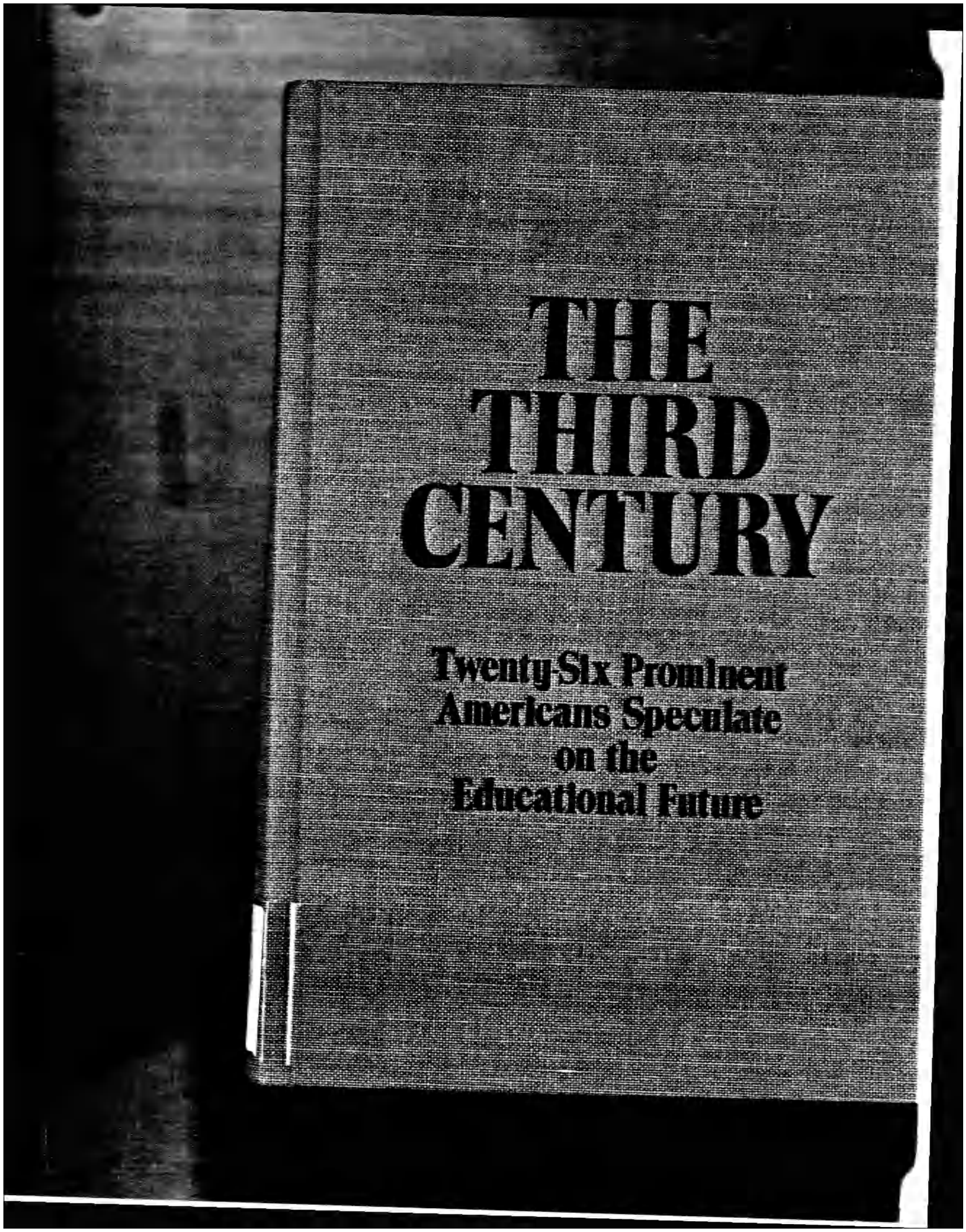
THE
THIRD
CENTURY
Twenty-Six Prominent
Americans Speculate
on the
Educational Future

Toward a New Interdependence

Ernest L. Boyer

Prophecy, a wit once remarked, is always dangerous—especially about the future. When I am asked to peer into what American higher education might look like in the year 2000, I feel a bit like Robert Benchley who, during a final exam at Harvard, was required to discuss the "arbitration of the conflict over offshore fishing rights" from both the British and the U.S. points of view. Writing in his exam book that he knew nothing about either position, he added: "I, therefore, should like to discuss the problem from the viewpoint of the fish."

From the fish-bowl perspective of a university chancellor, I can only venture some murky speculations about the future of higher education as we move toward AD 2000. Since Harvard College was founded in 1636, American education has passed through two major periods, each with a distinct flavor. The first era, beginning with Harvard, lasted over two centuries: There were no high schools. Our early colleges, small and usually church-related and often run by a minister, enrolled teen-age boys (as young as 14) from well-to-do families. These adolescent scholars pursued a cut-and-dried curriculum—all learned Greek and Latin—and then moved on, at 18 or so, as preachers, teachers, lawyers, doctors, or into other upper-class pursuits.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the second era had begun—marked by expanding enrollment, a more diverse social base, and an enlarged sense of educational mission. In the wake of westward migration, scores of colleges sprang up. Some died, but more survived to serve a burgeoning democracy. The 1850s saw

the first state agricultural college (Lansing, Michigan), the first two Negro colleges (Lincoln and Wilberforce), and Elmira College, which gave the first degrees to women. In the Civil War year of 1862, Abraham Lincoln signed the Land Grant College Act that linked the public university to the soil; and in New York, Ezra Cornell was to propose the founding of "an institution where any person can find instruction in any study."

Since World War II college doors have opened to those of every race and class, and the proportion of high school graduates going on to college has shifted from one in six to one in two. Today over eight million young Americans—almost half of those 18 to 21—are enrolled in higher education.

In the 1960s a new community college sprang up in America every 10 days. And in the 20-year period from 1950 to 1970, higher education expenditures rose from $3 billion to $31 billion, increasing (with adjustments for inflation) almost fivefold.

Inequalities, of course, persist. Four men attend college for every three women. And in the country as a whole, the proportion of whites who embark on higher education still remains roughly twice that of blacks. For the Spanish-speaking and for American Indians, the disparities are worse. But the *principle* and the *goal*—if not yet the total practice—of full educational opportunity for all have gained wide acceptance. Turning to the future, as we move toward AD 2000, it seems clear that higher education is about to enter a *third* period, and major shifts are certain to occur.

First, there will be a fundamental change in our idea about the kind of student to be served. And this shift will relate directly to changes in the ways people organize their lives. We have habitually chopped up the span of human life into slices like a great salami. First, there was a thin slice—12 to 20 years long—devoted almost exclusively to school and perhaps college. Next, there was the thickest chunk—for full-time work. And after that: retirement, the little nubbin at the end. These separate stages were kept rigidly apart and we moved inexorably from stage to stage.

In our desire to conform to this life pattern, we built schools and colleges only for the young. Classes were scheduled Monday through Friday, nine to four, coinciding with the world of work. Students were expected to pursue their studies full time before they entered the adult world, never to return. To be a college dropout turned into a stinging social stigma, a label to be avoided at all cost. Now all this has begun to change, and the implications for higher education are enormous. Consider, for example, the changes among the very young. Today about 40 percent of all boys and girls enroll in prekindergarten programs. Thousands

now watch "Sesame Street" and "The Electric Company" at home. The rigid lines between the so-called play years and the school years are vanishing.

The life pattern of older children has changed also. They now mature physically two full years earlier than did their grandparents 50 years ago. If Booth Tarkington were writing *Seventeen* today, he would have to title it *Fifteen*. College students can now vote, and they have as of this writing the right of legal contract in 43 of our 50 states. Some students leave college early or enroll only for part-time study, trying to break out of the educational straitjacket that seems to condemn them to endless incubation. It is a startling and significant fact that in 1975 over 55 percent of all those enrolled in postsecondary education were part-time students. Obviously, the so-called college years are becoming less and less well defined.

To add to this confusion, the well-ordered adult world of work is also beginning to break up. In 1900 the average American workweek was 62 hours; by 1945 it had dropped to 43, and today it is 37½ hours. An even shorter four-day workweek is now beginning to emerge. When we regain full employment, we will increasingly face the problem of what to do with our leisure time.

The lifestyle of older people is changing. We hear a lot about how we have moved from a baby boom to a baby bust, but we should also look at the opposite end of the population curve. Life expectancy has increased from 47 years in 1900 to 71 in 1973, and it is estimated that by 2000 nearly 30 percent of our population will be over 50. In addition, many older people, outdistanced by the pace of change, are being eased or forced into premature retirement during still productive years. This wasteful retirement pattern is tragic in human terms.

For years we have simply assumed that life for all of us was neatly programmed: the early days of freedom, then formal education, then work, then the abrupt click of the pasture gate. We quite properly built schools and colleges to fit this rigid cycle, servicing principally the young and unattached. But these rigidities are breaking up, and it seems clear that by the year 2000 higher education will be viewed not as a four-year prework *stage* of life, but as a continuing *process* to be pursued from 16 to 85.

This brings me to a second prediction: *As education redefines the student to be served, the pattern of our institutions will inevitably change as well.* New educational calendars, new techniques of learning, and new locations for study will be commonplace in the year 2000. For example, it seems clear that in the future more students will leave college early to test the water in the world of

work. This will be a planned interruption of the college experience—a kind of step-out (to replace the old dropout stigma) to provide the student with added perspective and maturity. What I envision is an arrangement that would allow all kinds of people to begin their working lives earlier—with intervals of service and travel—before they finish their degrees. It would assume that step-outs are not casualties and failures but the harbingers of quite a new view of the connection between education and real life.

Education will also establish new partnerships with industry and labor to intersperse formal and informal study throughout the working years. Both employers and employees are discovering that neither pure leisure nor pure work is fully satisfying. With increased leisure time, many employees often find themselves at loose ends. In his recent book *Working*, Studs Terkel suggests that "unfulfilling work may have touched malignantly the soul of our society." Looking ahead, I suspect that labor contracts of the 1980s and beyond will include agreements for continued learning arrangements that will free the worker for several hours or more a week to take a college course in his or her factory, store, or laboratory—not only specialized technical courses but liberal studies as well.

I foresee a period when sabbaticals for workers, professionals, and executives will be available as they already are in France and West Germany—regular periods for many people to refine their skills, to pursue long-neglected areas of interest, and to explore intellectual and cultural resources. I also foresee new programs for people in the retirement years. Increasingly, retirement will come to be viewed for what it is: a potentially productive and often vigorous period of life, ideal for further exploration of the world of learning. As zero population growth empties more residence halls on our campuses, they can be used to accommodate older persons interested in learning opportunities and activities in the arts.

Older people unable to come to the campus will not be written off. As we can go into the factories to teach, so also will we go into the nursing homes and the retirement villages. Should we allow a person, after a lifetime of productive work and experience, to vegetate intellectually simply because of the physical impairments of age? Who will pay for all of this? The learner, if he can. But if he cannot? We have Medicare for the body; why not Educare for the mind? The cost would be modest. The returns, in the enrichment of a difficult and often barren state of life, could be enormous. A Right-to-Learn commitment in our national life would recognize that learning and human dignity should walk hand in hand.

Another change is likely to occur. I can envision the day when,

along with their diplomas, we give college graduates a Certificate for Continued Learning, a kind of educational credit card valid for life, entitling them to further study on many campuses.

As these and other new patterns emerge, the individual will gain—but our universities also will profit. No longer will our campuses be youth ghettos, viewed by others with suspicion. Students, in turn, will look with less skepticism and anxiety toward the world beyond the campus. Indeed, the time will come when town and gown truly mix, and college will be a place where people of all ages move freely in and out. A college community that *is* a more representative community will then emerge.

Still, a nagging and age-old question remains: *Education to what end?* With all of our success in higher education, we are left with a paradox. At the same time that we have opened college doors wide, expanded the curriculum, and broken down the artificial barriers of time and place, the fundamental purposes underlying all this effort become increasingly obscured. Well before we reach the year 2000, we will be asking once again not only, Who should go to college? but, What should students take with them when they leave?

Since the ancient Greeks, men have believed that to be educated was somehow to be made better. The educated person respected the inheritance of the past, appreciated the realm of arts and letters, and communicated with both skill and grace. Flawed and naive as it may have been, this lofty vision led to a so-called core of common study for all students. In the Academy of Plato, rhetoric, philosophy, and mathematics were the prerequisites to statecraft. In the great universities of the Middle Ages, grammar, logic, rhetoric, music, astronomy, and geometry were the vital center. Most American colleges, in earlier days, offered a common core of classics and Christian doctrine with a smattering of mathematics thrown in.

Until the 1920s, the centerpiece on most campuses was the moral philosophy course taught by the college president, who was often a minister: President Maclean at Princeton said that "if he could find an able scholar who was a Presbyterian he would get him; if no such man was available he would secure a Presbyterian who was *not* an able scholar." Today, the notion of a single set of purposes for all students seems quaint and the so-called common core has been replaced almost everywhere by the free elective system, introduced in 1872 by President Eliot at Harvard. Research has become a major component of the university, thanks to the German influence imported late in the nineteenth century by Eliot and Johns Hopkins. Community service has burgeoned in the

post-World War II era. And, of course, religion as an academic discipline has all but disappeared.

Efforts to reverse these trends flickered and then died. The Harvard general education program of the 1940s unabashedly concerned itself with the content of education. The premise was that all citizens (at least all Harvard students) should have some common binding understanding of the roots of their culture and their heritage so that they could enrich it further and protect it from barbarians and zealots. But at most great liberal arts colleges today, only traces of this noble venture can be found.

During the middle 1960s, Columbia tried to revive interest in this issue, and Daniel Bell produced a searching analysis of the goals of education. But the faculty showed so little interest that Lionel Trilling called this "a sad and significant event in the culture of our time." Clearly, we have come a long way since President Maclean assembled a closed-shop faculty of Presbyterians at Princeton. The general education ideal, already weakened, was battered by the social and political upheavals of the 1960s. During this tumultuous decade it was the important, urgent, and essential drive for open access which became the new and central goal of higher learning. But in the process, the larger goals and purposes of education were aggressively pushed aside.

Now a new kind of urgency confronts us. The issue quite simply is survival. There is a growing recognition that the future prospects for both man and nature are in peril and that higher education has a special obligation to respond. As Robert Heilbroner asked in the *New York Review of Books*: "There is a question in the air, a question so disturbing that I would hesitate to ask it aloud did I not believe it existed unvoiced in the minds of many: Is there hope for man?"

Heilbroner's question may focus on the issue a bit too sharply; yet one need not be negative to suggest that we may have reached a point in history when it is no longer possible to assume that some cosmic United Fund guarantees our future. Not merely the chronic doomsayers but also a host of clear-eyed analysts suggest that through a myriad of unintended actions, we may be foreclosing the possibility of life on earth—or so narrowing it that a paralysis of the human spirit is as likely as a nuclear Armageddon.

I believe that time has come to formulate a new, unified central purpose for education, a purpose that can help us understand more clearly the interdependency of peoples and institutions in our world—not just in an ecological sense, but in a social sense as well. Our goal should be to stir within students a global urgency, alerting them to the awesome challenges civilization will confront

in the decades just ahead. In proposing this new thrust, I do not suggest that a novel set of courses be required of all students. I am not urging that we again restrict the Princeton faculty to Presbyterians, nor am I denigrating in the slightest the work of thousands of dedicated faculty who already are dealing so vitally with the thorny problems of our era. I am not suggesting that we introduce a new elitism that would reduce support for the broad range of programs which now prepare all manner of students for all manner of worthwhile work.

What I am suggesting is that we move toward a new convergence in higher learning—one that goes beyond the smorgasbord of free electives and focuses on such basic issues as our global supply of food and water, the population problem, energy: its origin and distribution (as in mass transportation), and other, subtler circumstances that influence the quality of our lives. The goal would be a new kind of liberal learning—which draws upon the wisdom of the past, organizes appropriately the knowledge of the present, and focuses sharply on alternatives for the future. Such a program would be rooted in the arts and sciences and in research, but new common core academic programs and new linkages among the current fields of study also would be provided. Specialized courses to inform the faculty, all-campus lecturers and midyear seminars for all students, and carefully selected field experiences—all would be helpful as colleges and universities sought to introduce this new dimension on the campus.

We simply must do a better job of alerting our students to the larger contours of their world, of helping them see the broader ramifications of their actions, and of conveying the urgent need to marshal all our resources as we confront the critical choices of the future. Is there hope for man? Of course there is, provided we can extricate ourselves from immediate preoccupations that loom so large, to confront creatively the issues that urgently press upon us.

The irony here is that we already know the scope of the challenge we now face. The world has 27 days' worth of reserve food supply, and the earth's population now multiplies by 95 million each year. We burn up millions of irreplaceable and unaffordable barrels of oil a day, and the nuclear threat remains. These realities suggest that we must reaffirm the very old notion that the whole human being is more important than each of its parts.

A friend suggested to a former college dean that scientists might soon be able to sever the human brain from the rest of the body and, with appropriate machinery, keep it alive indefinitely with no connection to the heart. "That's nothing new," replied the dean. "We've been doing it on our campus for many years!" The

dean's witty comment touches on a vital issue. In recent decades we have concentrated enormous energies on enlarging the physical capacity of our colleges, so that the democratic ideal might be more fully realized for more people. That commitment must remain central to our purpose. But we must now also turn to another task: that of defining with more clarity—and perhaps more passion—the large social meaning, the broader human purpose, of this massive effort.

So as I look toward the year 2000, I see an education program that will serve new people—men and women from all walks of life—through recurrent education from ages 16 to 85. I see an education program with new patterns: with step-outs, sabbaticals, and with courses in the home, the factory, and on the TV screen. I see a program of education with new purposes: with a special focus on the ways we may survive with dignity on the planet earth.

Beyond all this I have a deep and abiding faith that as men and women—rich and poor, young and old—begin to learn together and deliberate the new central issues of our time and of our future, a network of educational town meetings will emerge across the land. As we begin to talk and plan together, a new sense of interdependence will stir among us and, as it does, prospects for humanity in the year 2000 may become brighter than they seem today.