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Remarks of  
Ernest L. Boyer  
U.S. Commissioner of Education  
at the  
Second Annual Ralph Tyler Address  
Doane College  
Crete, Nebraska  
May 31, 1979

It's a very special honor to be asked to speak at a convocation named in honor of Dr. Ralph Tyler.

Dr. Tyler has been called "the father of educational evaluation" and "an educator's educator."

He has been adviser to Presidents (four of them) and an architect of President Johnson's education programs, which are still the cornerstone of Federal aid-to-education.

But Dr. Tyler has been to me a very special friend. For over twenty years I have gained from his very special combination of vision and proficiency, and Ralph Tyler has influenced me professionally more than any other person.

I was delighted when Dr. Tyler and his alma mater got together to create the National Institute for Career Development. I congratulate Doane College -- President

Heckman, and Institute Director Ed Watkins, and especially the board of trustees -- for identifying an important need and for responding in such a provocative and practical way. This Institute has clearly proved its worth in a very short time. And already it is indeed a model for higher education across the country.

I also commend the American Society for Personnel Administrators for its vision and commitment in co-sponsoring this second annual National Conference on Career Development.

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For nearly three and one half centuries, the expansion of educational opportunity has continued to be a central public policy in this Nation.

In America, we have continued to affirm that education and democracy are inextricably interlocked.

This goal -- this commitment to equal educational opportunity -- is still an unfinished agenda in this Nation, and it must be vigorously pursued.

II

At the turn of the century, Samuel Gompers, the great labor leader wrote: "Education should provide so wide an understanding of the relation of one's work to society that no vocation could become a rut and no worker could be 'shut off' from a full and rich life in his work."

Samuel Gompers captured magnificently the spirit of this conference. The richness of one's education and the fulfillment of one's work are inextricably interlocked.

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And yet that powerful declaration also leaves us with a tantalizing problem.

How can we provide our students with what Gompers called, "so wide an understanding." What can we do to make life rich and full and not reduced to what Gompers called--a rut.

In response to this central challenge -- I'd like to put my own position on the line.

I happen to believe that to prepare students for a productive life, decisions must be made. The curriculum needs something I'll call structure.

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Here I must insert an important caveat.

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

### III

But this story of diversity, with all of its validity and vision, has an unhappy sequel.

Today the safest thing one can say about a college diploma is that the student probably has been around the campus for about four years.

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

I'm convinced its time to reaffirm that truly educated persons also

- o must move beyond themselves,
- o must gain social perspectives,

- o must see themselves in relation to other people and times,
- o or to return to Gompers we need an education that widens understanding and places ones life and work in perspective.

IV

Here's my point:

A curriculum that suggests that students have nothing in common is just as flawed as one that suggests that all students are alike. And I believe that if we are to achieve a "wider understanding" we must introduce students to the common experiences which are widely shared.

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There is of course no single combination of courses to capture the essence of our oneness. But I'd like to suggest several possibilities to illustrate the point.

First, to widen our perspective students should understand that we share a common heritage.

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- o All students should be introduced to the events, individuals, the great ideas and great literature that have contributed consequentially to human gains and losses.
- o An understanding of this "past" from which all of us have come should be required of all students.

Obviously, to talk about "our heritage" has a familiar ring. But a notion need not be rejected just because it is familiar, and if our schools and colleges do not help keep the past alive, we not only will have lost our past, we will have lost our future, too.

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Second, we all confront the challenges of the present --  
and our search for a wider understanding should reflect this fact.

It has always seemed curious that most past experiments in general education have focused exclusively--almost compulsively--on the past.

- o They have been remarkably inattentive to the crucial common experiences in the contemporary world.

- o I believe a quality curriculum should also examine our existence here and now and focus on those "contemporary circumstances" that also shape our lives.

Here I have three examples to illustrate the point:

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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 also 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.

- o By looking at television news, they might elaborate a notion of "tube literacy."
- o This emphasis on language is essential not only because it is "the connecting tissue" of our culture, but also because it becomes the tool for other learning.

Second, all of us are caught up in a world of social institutions. 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.

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And this brings one to the central message of this conference. I also believe that if students are to acquire the "wide understanding" of which Gompers spoke they must understand the centrality of work.

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

It is true of course that some work is not vocation and that some jobs are not uplifting, but degrading.

- o But the problem of relating work to education cannot be so easily dismissed.
- o Many useful, challenging, and crucial jobs have emerged in recent years, yet schools and colleges still confer "prime legitimacy" on those jobs that have been around the longest and to those we like the best.

Because of tradition, lethargy, ignorance, and snobbery, mindless distinctions are made between what is vocationally "legitimate and illegitimate." Such distinctions have led to equally mindless choices about what can and cannot be offered at the arts and science colleges.

- 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?

Faculty -- look scorefully at any talk of jobs devout every waking hour to assure that they have tenure.

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 condition.

This is not to urge that colleges become vocational. Rather, it is to suggest that we begin to rediscover the true meaning of liberal education.

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Several years ago, I spent several months in Cambridge, England.

It's a bucolic spot  
with gardens, ivy-covered walls,  
quiet academic courts, all far removed  
from the corridors of commerce and from  
the clang of industry -- or so it seems.

And yet there is another story to be told. During my Cambridge stay I read The Masters, by C.P. Snow -- a novel that probes academic politics by describing the process by which a Cambridge college selects a master.

In the appendix of the book Snow talks about the history of Cambridge University -- how it all began. He tells how students came to study with their tutors 600 years ago. They slept in dirty lofts and went hungry many times.

They faced poverty for months for one simple reason: Jobs lay ahead: "jobs in the royal administration, the courts, the church, jobs teaching in the schools."

The training was in fact vocational, Snow declared, "and jobs lay at the end."

Harvard College was founded not only to defend the Christian faith, but also to prepare young men for jobs: the ministry, law, medicine, teaching, and professions pursued by the privileged class.

In more recent years our arts and science majors -- so far removed from charges of vocationalism -- have been in fact quite practical in their thrust, with students going on to graduate school or specialized job training.

The unspoken assumption has always been that our graduates would get productive jobs; and the greatest embarrassment for any academic department is to discover that its graduates cannot get "placed."

VI

One final point, I propose that to acquire a "wide understanding" students must

- o not only look at the heritage we share,
- o and not only reflect on fundamental common experiences of the present,

- o but they also must focus on 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, millenium tracts, and other sources of such images.

- o Who are the social prophets of our time?
- o What images of the future does our society possess?
- o What are our central dogmas, and our stated or unstated forecasts?

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

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

VII

Dr. Lewis Thomas--author of Lives of a Cell, and a trustee of the 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 sort 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 unfulfilled. 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. It is a plea for the wider understanding of which Samuel Gompers spoke and I believe this understanding can be achieved -- as students gain more knowledge of themsleves, see themselves in social context and grasp the pact through our work that we acheive a fulfilling and productive life.

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