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**A QUEST FOR COMMON LEARNING**

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When James B. Conant prepared his report on the American high school over 20 years ago, he said that:

"When someone says that what we need today is to decide what we mean by education a sense of weariness overtakes me."

Conant went on to say that:

"I am ready to define education as what goes on in colleges and schools."

Well, that's simple enough. And I must confess that anyone who has been beaten down by curriculum committees or who has been smothered by mushy articles on the aims of education certainly can appreciate the weariness of Dr. Conant.

And yet, this meeting of the Danforth Association--swims against the tide. We have been convened to explore the theme, The Value of Liberal Learning Reconsidered.

Thirty-five years ago--the German Philosopher, Karl Jaspers--defined the goal of education as culture.

"Culture," Jaspers said, "is a given historical ideal--a coherent system of associations, gestures, values, ways of putting things."

"The educated person," Jaspers concludes, "is one for whom 'culture'--so defined--has become second nature."

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Today, a generation after Jaspers wrote, we find ourselves deeply hesitant about the aims of education.

In Jaspers' terms, what precisely does characterize culture? And how do we define the educated person in our complicated post-modern society?

This brings me then to what I understand to be the purpose of this meeting. Is there an education is common to all people? And, if so, how should it be defined?

Last year, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, looked extensively at the curriculum on the college campus.

And this year, we're visiting high schools from coast to coast. In both investigations, we've discovered a growing conviction that education must be something more than career training or a grab bag of electives.

The conviction is growing that--through general education--all students should gain perspective and understand that they are not only autonomous individuals, but also part of a larger human community to which they are inextricably connected.

There is--to put it simply--a growing feeling in our midst that in an increasingly independent world, we simply cannot afford a generation that fails to see or care about connections.

Stanford students can't impose uniform standards on ununiformed people--and still have some things in common.

John Gardner said on one occasion that:

"the deepest threat to the integrity of any community is an incapacity on the part of the

citizens to lend themselves to any worthy common purpose."

Gardner goes on to reflect on the

"barrenness of a life that encompasses nothing beyond the self."

In response to such "barrenness" the belief persists that education--at its best--can hold the intellectual center of society together, and that--through general education--the nation's colleges and schools can perform for society an integrative function seeking appropriate responses to life's most enduring questions. And, that, it seems to me, is the conviction that's brought us here today.

But, if there should be an education common to all students,

- o How is it to be defined?
- o What in fact is the core of education?

In the Carnegie report entitled A Quest for Common Learning, we suggest that general education is a study of those relationships, traditions and experiences that are common to all people by virtue of their membership in the human community.

And, we define some of these common experiences as:

- o our use of language;
- o our shared sense of history;
- o our membership in groups and institutions;
- o our interdependent relationship with nature; and
- o our common activities of work and leisure.

We identify these as central themes, not because they parallel the traditional academic fields, but because they all relate to a universal human experience that in one way or another shapes the life of every individual.

Consider, for example, our use of symbols. Certainly language is our most essential social function. It's the connecting tissue that binds society together. The sending and receiving of messages separates human beings from all other forms of life, and unless language is well developed, students cannot academically and socially succeed.

When I was Commissioner of Education, I was often asked to define the "basics". My response was always very brief.

Language, I said, is the basic of the basics and every student must learn in the early grades not only to read and write, but to read with understanding, to write with clarity and to effectively speak and listen.

And in the upper grades and in college, all students should explore the rich heritage of literature, learn to use imagination and allusion and understand as well that we communicate--not just with words--but with dance and music and visual arts. And, increasingly, they must become familiar with the language of computers.

Incidentally, frequently I'd be told that this is far too ideal and standard--that only "gifted students" truly master language. We must remind ourselves that the average child who

marches off to school has already mastered the miracle of language.

- o He understands the use of symbols.
- o He can use the intricate rules of grammar, and has a vocabulary of several thousand words.

Indeed language development begins--they say--when the unborn infant begins to monitor the mother's voice. Therefore, the task is not just to introduce language to the student, but to build on the literacy foundation that's already well in place. The goal is to raise--not lower expectations higher.

I conclude that building respect for the power and learning of language is the centerpiece of common learning. It must be at the core of education.

Consider also the centrality of history. As human beings, we can recall the past and anticipate the future. And, as a part of common learning, all students should gain perspective from the past.

They should understand that--while we each have our separate roots--we also--in the broadest sense--have a common heritage that shapes our lives today.

It is, I feel, particularly disturbing that in the latest National Assessment History Survey, only 4 out of 10 9-year olds tested knew that Columbus first sailed west in search of new waterways to the East. And only 4 out of 10 knew that the American Revolution was fought for independence from British Rule.

It seems self-evident that to be educated is to know something about the seminal ideas and the key events that have consequently shaped the course of history and that have kept alive the religious heritage as well. This, I believe, should be a part of the essential core.

Now, let me say a word about the study of the natural world--as a part of common learning.

It seems to me that every educated person should understand that there are no solitary free living creatures. They should discover the simple truth that every form of life is dependent on other forms through general education. They should explore the elegant, underlying patterns of the natural world and learn the methods of science by which such patterns are discovered.

Today, 8 out of 10 colleges in America have a general education "science requirement" of one kind or another. And, yet, the larger view of science frequently is lost. Professor Dan Clouser of the Pennsylvania State College of Medicine recently observed that

most students--even after a course in biology or chemistry--have little grasp of how science works and what its theories are. Science is for them only a catalogue of facts.

I suggest that becoming a responsible human being in the last quarter of the 20th Century means learning about our relationship with nature and discovering the tools we use to explore this awesome world.

I'd also like to comment briefly on work and leisure which may--at first seem strangely out of place in a catalogue of common learning.

The truth is, of course, as human beings, we spend most of our lives producing and consuming. Work is essential to survival and there are even those who argue that the urge to be useful is rooted in the genes.

At the Carnegie Foundation Conference on Common Learning at the University of Chicago a year ago, Lewis Thomas told a story from the termite world that may have relevance for us. He said that:

When three or four termites are collected together in a chamber, they wander about aimlessly, getting nothing in particular done. But when more termites were added, the situation changes and they begin to BUILD.

They pick up each others pellets, stack them in neat columns, and then--when the columns are precisely the right height--they reach across and turn out the perfect arches which form the foundation of the termitarium.

No single termite knows how to do any of this, Lewis Thomas says. But as soon as there are enough of them, they become collectively flawless architects sensing their distances from each other--although blind--building an immensely complicated structure with its own air conditioning and humidity control.

We are, of course, remarkably more intelligent than the termites or so we have concluded. We can as individuals be creative. But, termites do raise, for us, the tantalizing issue of what--collectively--we could accomplish if we could get our act together. What is our equivalent of the termitarium?

In any event, I suggest that general education may well include a study of work and its central significance in the lives of every individual.

- o What have been the historical attitudes toward work around the world?
- o Why is some work more highly prized than others?
- o How do notions of work relate to social status?

Exploring questions such as these can be essential in preparing our students for vocation.

Finally, I'd like to talk about the study of our social institutions and focus specifically on what we used to call civic education.

In the early days of the American Republic "civics" was a central goal for all of education. Walter Lippman wrote on one occasion that

the men who wrote the American Constitution and the Bill of Rights, were educated in schools and colleges in which the classical works of Western culture were the substance of the curriculum. In these schools, the transmission of this culture was held to be the end and aim of education.

Today, of course, civics is not a high priority of education. Indeed, the very word "civics" is hopelessly out of date. It sounds a bit like arsenic and old lace.

Today less than 10 percent of the nation's colleges and universities require students to take a course that focuses directly on government and its functions. And, there is a sharp decline at the high school level, too.

Between 1961 and 1973, high school enrollments increased by 59 percent. However during this same period, enrollments in civics courses declined by 39 percent.

Significantly, enrollments in psychology and personal adjustment courses increased by 323 percent.

In California from 1970-75, social studies enrollments dropped by 300,000 students even though overall high school enrollment moved ahead.

Our own study of the high school reveals that between 1972 and 1980, five states reduced their civics and social studies requirement with only two states moving it ahead.

The latest National Assessment "Social Studies" survey reveals that

- o Only 31 percent of all 13-year olds tested and only 53 percent of all 17-year olds, knew that each state had two senators in the U.S. Senate.
- o Forty-eight percent of the 13-year olds thought it was against the law to start a new political party other than the Democrats and Republicans.

- o Thirty percent thought Congress had the right to establish a national church.
- o One out of every seven 17-year olds thought the President does not always have to obey the law.
- o Less than one-half of the 17-year olds understood how to use all parts of a sample ballot.
- o Only one-third of the 13-year olds knew that the Supreme Court had the power to declare an act of Congress unconstitutional.
- o And only 17 percent knew that presidential candidates are nominated at national conventions.

The harsh truth is that many of our students are shockingly ill-informed about government and its function. It does not overstate the case. I believe, to suggest that we are becoming civically illiterate and unless we strengthen common learning in the study of our social institutions, we run the risk of drifting unwittingly into a new kind of dark age--a time when citizens will make critical decisions--not on the basis of what they know, but on the basis of blind faith in one or another set of experts.

In an increasingly volatile and interdependent world where quite literally our survival is at stake, this ignorance about government and about public policy issues--is not an acceptable alternative. I believe the time has come for the tired old work horse civics to be brought down from the attic and dusted off.

Specifically, I suggest that preparation for citizenship become--once again--a central goal of education.

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- o All students --as a part of common learning--should be introduced to the great political thinkers throughout history -- Plato, Hobbes, Locke, Madison, Calhoun, to name a few.
- o All students should learn about our own government.
  - The Federalist Papers
  - The Declaration of Independence
  - The Constitution and The Bill of Rights
- o But equally important, all students should study government today and explore--in-depth-one or more selected public issues:
  - defense policy
  - social security
  - nuclear power
  - low-income housing

The goal is not to become a specialist in every issue. The goal is to see how governments evolve, or even in one perhaps, how they work, how they make mistakes and even tyrannize at times, and how they can be changed.

I have one final point. In the 1980's and beyond, the majority of our students will be over 21. Lifelong learning will be not the exception--but the rule.

And I suggest that the nation's colleges and universities--especially the community colleges--become systematically engaged in the civic education of adults.

In the days ahead, we will urgently need serious academic programs tailored especially to older students and the study of

government and public issues strike me as an appropriate model to pursue.

Now I'd like to return to the place where I began. There is--in my opinion--a core of education that should not be left to chance.

Through general education, the nation's colleges and schools should introduce all students to

- o the centrality of language,
- o the significance of our common heritage,
- o the importance of man's relationship to nature,
- o the place of work and leisure in our lives, and
- o the institutions we use to govern our affairs.

In the end, of course, general education is not a single bet of course. It is a program with a clear objective and while there may be great flexibility in the process, it is the clarity of purpose that is crucial. And, it calls for much greater cooperation between the nation's colleges and schools.

Nearly 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 say that

the student who can begin early in life to think of things as connected (even if he revises his view with every succeeding year) has begun the life of learning.

I agree with Mark Van Doren that helping students see the "connectedness" of things--and acting with conviction--is absolutely crucial, and this, it seems to me, represents the central goal of common learning.