

HOLD FOR AUTOMATIC RELEASE
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THE INFLUENCE OF EXCELLENCE:
BENNINGTON COLLEGE AND HIGHER EDUCATION
Address by Dr. Edward J. Bloustein
Prepared for Delivery October 9, 1965, at ~~his~~ Inauguration

Distinguished guests, family and friends:

I am filled with pride and happiness to be able to speak to you today as the Fifth President of Bennington College. I am also filled with a sense of my own inadequacy; inadequacy, not only in face of the task which lies ahead of me as President of this College, but also in face of the task which I have set for myself today.

I could have asked Dr. Bronowski to come here today to "give me away" in the genteel "academic marriage" tradition of college inaugurations; instead, I asked him to come to set a challenge before me and this College.

I could also have chosen to speak to you today about the esoteric reaches of philosophy or law. In doing this, I would, at least, have had the comfort of having my words take on the aura of dignity and immutability which the academic degrees I hold in these fields---witnessed by my multicolored gown---bestow. Instead, I have chosen to speak about problems of higher education and how Bennington College intends to meet them---subjects not covered by any of the colors of my gown and in which I can pretend to no traditional academic expertise.

Both of these choices imply a degree of immodesty on my part and call for some brief justification. In the first place, the trustees, faculty, and students of this College have asked me to help lead the

College rather than merely to bask in the reflection of its past glory. And leadership is necessarily an immodest posture.

Secondly, neither the pace of our times nor the pulse of the life of this college permit me the luxury of a long period of time in which to reflect in the abstract and at leisure on the problems of higher education or on this College's needs. I must think while acting and gain whatever wisdom of my art I am capable of while practicing it.

This, then, is why I am rash enough to attempt to describe how Bennington College will meet its contemporary challenges and thereby renew its claim to leadership in American education. This, then, is why I have the temerity to talk to you about the influence of excellence, about Bennington College and the problems of higher education.

Dr. Bronowski has posed the challenge of teaching science as a cultural rather than as a vocational subject, and he has been kind enough to suggest that Bennington College might lead the nation in accomplishing this objective. I can best assure him and you that his confidence is well-placed by attempting a general assessment of the College's capacity for contemporary educational leadership.

The recent White House Conference on education, in which I participated, bore witness to the seriousness of the problems which our colleges and universities face. Most profound among these are the disaffection of large numbers of students and the rising doubts in the community at large about the direction being taken by our institutions of higher education.

Students have begun to cry out--and I repeat a slogan which has appeared with increasing frequency on the campuses of many of our

"multiversities"--"I am a human being; do not fold, bend or mutilate." This voice of protest reflects dehumanization and standardization of curriculum and teaching methods; it reflects the alienation and estrangement of the student from his university. Students are "cool" to the very institutions which are intended to nurture and stimulate their moral, intellectual, and emotional development.

The second source of disaffection with higher education is the community itself, which finds the university increasingly remote from the tumult and tragedy of our times. We require statesmen and citizens who can fashion civilized responses to, and who can make moral sense out of, the strains and stresses of a society and world in transition. But, too many of our universities graduate technicians and specialists who are frequently, ethically neutral, who take either an indifferent or an uncritical attitude towards contemporary moral problems.

Serving science and technology, the "multiversity" has tended to sacrifice man; primarily organized, financed, and administered to fulfill the one task, the community feels it has neglected the other.

Now, Bennington College, although young in years and small in size, has already made a significant contribution to the resolution of both of these problems. And, in this sense, Bennington's past might well serve as prologue in the national search for new directions in higher education.

Thus, we at Bennington long ago abandoned a required curriculum in favor of individualizing a student's program of studies in the light of his needs, motivation, and aspiration. We long ago adopted a system of weekly individual counseling as a substitute for an

intermittent and impersonal advisory program; and we long ago brought highly creative and practicing artists into our college community as functioning members of our faculty, rather than as occasional performers or secluded artists in residence. And, finally, we long ago broke with the academic pattern of exclusive devotion to abstraction, by requiring our students to spend one portion of the school year testing theory against reality by performing a useful and responsible role in the daily life of the community beyond the college gates.

Each of these innovations helps fill the College community with the warmth of one person responding to another's needs and desires; each also helps to identify the College as a source of human value, as a source of what is good in life. These innovations have been influential in the past and should continue to be influential in the future as models of what can be done to help keep our colleges and universities from becoming morally and emotionally sterile institutes of technology.

Bennington's past successes are important for themselves and for what they have inspired elsewhere. They are more important, however, for having demonstrated this College's unique capacity for invention and articulation of new educational forms when more traditional ones have lost their vitality. Untraditional in mood and temper, the College is nevertheless firmly wed to one tradition, the tradition of experimentalism in educational structure and purpose. It is this which especially qualifies the College for leadership in meeting contemporary educational problems.

Dr. Bronowski has already stated one of today's major challenges to higher education which the College must attempt to meet. Before dealing with it, I would like to discuss briefly three others. I hope you will all understand that what I am about to outline is not a finished plan of action, but rather only a tentative beginning. I intend merely to open discussion on this issue, not to close it.

Student unrest and community dissatisfaction with our colleges reflect, at least in part, weaknesses in the conventional organization of responsibility for the direction of higher education. No college can expect to inculcate habits of responsibility in students by systematically denying them a significant opportunity to exercise it in the day-by-day affairs of college life. Nor can a college fulfill its long-term obligations to the democratic community if that community is without a voice in the government of the college.

Bennington students already play a significant role in the government of the College, and the structure of community responsibility for College life is broader here than in most colleges. But this is an area where good work is still to be done. We must squarely ask ourselves, as few educators have, who is responsible for higher education in America today and why. Having faced the question, we might then construct the kind of collegiate constitution which will invite broader and more democratic participation in college life by faculty, students, and the wider community. This does not mean community control of what is taught nor community control of day-by-day administration of the College; it rather means only some form of broader community participation in the discussion of the basic aims and objectives of higher education.

Another area of current concern in which this College can be expected to exercise its creative gifts is that of morals. Many of our colleges and universities have mistaken the impropriety of imposing standards of value upon students with the necessity for an attitude of institutional indifference towards them; eschewing the role of a moral guardian, they have rejected any role in the student's moral life. The result has been the creation of a value vacuum on college campuses; a vacuum in which college presidents, administrators, and faculty have withdrawn from even discussing moral issues with students, in which they have hidden their morals under bushel baskets.

In my opinion, neither this College nor any other should assume the role of a moral guardian; nor do we need a new source of moral authority on college campuses. The need is rather only to find a means for the college to express its values without either imposing them or seeming to do so. The still greater need is to provide suitable occasions for the discussion on the campus of the problems of value which students face. The need, in other words, is not for the college to provide moral answers, but rather to provide a forum for raising moral questions; the need is not for moral dogma, but rather for moral dialogue.

The College's talent for exploring new educational directions should also be put to the development of a program of continuing education for women. Many colleges and foundations have begun to experiment with this problem. They have been unsuccessful for the most part, however, and the reason for their failure, I believe, is that they have been too timid; they have tinkered with the old structure instead of tearing it down and starting anew.

Graduate education postponed until after children have grown up is no answer for the women whose vital intellectual capacity is sapped by what seems to them like empty and endless hours, days, and years during which they serve as combination caretakers, nurses, policewomen, cooks and kitchen helpers. Nor is the availability of an occasional course which breaks the boredom of housewifery a substitute for systematic continuing education. Some way must rather be found to allow those mothers of young children who are capable, and have the desire to do so, to care for their children while also continuing their education.

Finally, I turn to the challenge which Dr. Bronowski has so eloquently posed for us today. He and Sir Charles Snow have brought to the popular consciousness the unhappy fact that our culture is torn in two, with physical scientists and humanists deaf to each other's tongue. The cultural impasse is reflected in many of our colleges and universities, which day by day are making themselves over--by force of circumstance, more so than by choice, to be sure--to teach the language of science, to the neglect of the language of the humanities.

Thus far, to the credit of our scientists and our faculty as a whole, we at Bennington have resisted this tendency towards academic scientism, imposed as it is by the pressure of the prestigious image of the academic scientist and by the funding policies of government and some of the foundations. In part, however, we have resisted it by unduly restricting the development of the natural sciences. Our pattern of admissions, the allocation of our own resources, and the very attitude of some of our humanist faculty have enforced on this campus almost the mirror image of the distortion which has been manifest on

other campuses. If the problem on other campuses is to restore the primacy of the study of man, the problem here is to accelerate the study of science and to further its understanding as an essential humanistic study.

The student of science who lacks a sense of human perspective and an appreciation of the obligations, delights, and creative satisfactions of his cultural heritage may succeed in building the machinery of science, but his machines will be blind to what is essential to humanity. The student of the humanities who is insensitive to the poetry, the imaginative force, the method, and the social consequences of the institutions of science may capture a vision of human life, but it will be a vision of the life of another day, of the life of a pre-scientific era. The solution is to instil our scientists with an appropriate recognition of man's estate and to instil our humanists with an appropriate grasp of science as a central facet of contemporary society.

We at Bennington have an unequalled opportunity to capture the middle ground in teaching science, an unequalled opportunity to humanize science. We have, in the first place, a tradition of educational experimentalism which provides the required institutional will and capacity to break the teaching molds which have been found wanting and to create new ones to do the job which has to be done. We have, in the second place, a faculty which puts man at the center of the educational universe and which would not tolerate the growth of a form of academic scientism which pursues its sectarian ends to the neglect of individual students and over-all human purposes. Finally, we have created an academic community which, because of its intimate

size and its humane and artistic temper, has already attracted and will increasingly attract scientists who are revolted by academic scientism and seek refuge from those academic institutions in which it flourishes.

I do not propose---even if it were possible---that Bennington become a center of advanced scientific thought and research; I do propose, however, that we teach science not only as a vocational subject, but also--to use Dr. Bronowski's words--as a "cultural subject". I do not propose that Bennington students be required to study science, any more than they are required to study any other subject. I do propose, however, that they be offered the opportunity to share in its intellectual excitement and to appreciate its social consequences.

In the imaginative resolution of the problem of teaching science in a liberal arts tradition and of the other contemporary problems which I have outlined, the College will continue to serve in the future the role of a national herald of educational innovation which it has served so well in the past. A new idea brought to fruition, imagination unleashed, excellence achieved; these are Bennington College's strengths and they are more forceful levers of educational change than wealth and size or position and power. We must continue to exercise these strengths in overcoming contemporary problems, or fall into that comfortable oblivion of those who rest on their past laurels.