

Inaugural Address

by

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as

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I think it appropriate at the opening of Bennington College's second quarter century, and before an audience whose common characteristic is a thoughtful concern for their own and others' education, to examine the omens for higher education. In doing so I cannot avoid pointing first to some familiar signs.

There will be a fearsome increase in college enrollments in the next few years. The children are welling up through the lower schools, filling and overflowing the classrooms. The number of children in each age group, the per cent graduating from high school, and the per cent going on to college have all increased. There is a noticeable tendency toward greater selectivity at entrance, but this is at least partially compensated by a higher rate of retention. At the same time that the pressure in the boiler is rising the safety valve is closing.

There will be a grave shortage of qualified teachers. Indeed, there is already a perceptible decline in the qualifications of new teachers entering the profession. The appropriateness of present Ph. D. programs as training for teachers may be questioned, but no one can demur at the use of the degree as a barometer of the supply of teachers. The percentage of newly appointed college teachers who have the Ph. D. degree is declining while the percentage of those

who have only the bachelor's degree is increasing. (The percentage with master's degrees is holding steady.) The colleges are also drawing a larger percentage of their new teachers from the hard pressed secondary schools. Though many of these teachers are undoubtedly excellent, they must be replaced by others with poorer qualifications. The total system faces dilution.

In spite of the dilution, and as an antidote for it, both equity and necessity demand that faculty salaries be increased. It has been estimated that they will double in the next ten years. If the long term inflationary trend continues, as most economists fear it will, the other costs of colleges will also rise.

Rising enrollments and the explosive expansion of knowledge will create a pressing demand for every type of building used by a college or a university.

All the sources of educational support will have their faith in higher education tested by the pressure on their purses.

One is struck by the parallel between the position of higher education today and secondary education some sixty years ago: the oncoming cloud of students, the shortage of teachers, their low pay, the need for buildings, and the pressing problems of finance.

The expansion of the public school system in the first half of this century was a magnificent achievement, one of which the nation and the schoolman may be proud. But it was not accomplished without serious losses. Independent secondary schools were very nearly ruined. They have recently recovered in quality and strength, if not in influence and the proportion of students they serve, but their resurgence has been due, as much as anything else, to the unavoidable deficiencies of the public schools in a period of expansion. The gifted public school student has been necessarily neglected. College preparation has declined in average effectiveness. No satisfactory solution has been

developed for the unacademic student who is compelled by one set of laws to attend school and forbidden by another set to go on the labor market. He is a disruptive influence in the school and the community, but more important he is a human loss that rests heavily on our conscience. There is a widespread taxpayer's revolt against the support of education which is spreading from the local communities to the states.

If the impending expansion of higher education follows the same course as expansion of secondary education, similar results seem inevitable. The independent college and university will decline in importance. Strong individual institutions can certainly resist the trend and perhaps grow in inner strength, but their influence, so important even to the public institutions, will lose much of its force. The dilution I spoke of will affect the quality of collegiate education and professional preparation. The graduate schools will take over the role of complainant from the colleges. The educational tax base, which had to be broadened from the community to the state to accommodate the expansion of the schools will have to be broadened again to the federal government to accommodate the expansion of the colleges. The already touchy tax situation will be aggravated by questions of federal control, distribution of funds among states and for specific purposes, church and state, and integration.

These trends are ominous. There are also hopeful signs. There is a growing realization that not all the increase in enrollment need be or should be absorbed by residential four year colleges and universities. Local and community colleges, less costly and with less difficult staffing problems, are being fostered. New types of educational institutions offering further rather than higher education are being developed.

A great deal is being done to forestall the teacher shortage. Ph. D. programs are being re-examined. Fellowship opportunities are being expanded to



attract promising college graduates into preparation for college teaching. The secondary-school teacher pool being tapped by the colleges is at the same time being replenished by graduates from teachers colleges which are rapidly changing into liberal arts colleges, and from the old-line liberal arts colleges and universities which are reassuming their former role as suppliers of school teachers.

The use of faculty resources is being widely and thoughtfully studied. The most common approaches are increasing class size, placing more responsibility for independent study on the student, the use of assistants, the use of television and other electronic and mechanical devices, and the revision of the curriculum to eliminate overlapping and duplication. Some institutions are beginning to share faculty members. Others, through regional pacts, concentrate students at the institutions where the faculty can be used most effectively.

New attention is being given to the efficient use of plant. Different term arrangements are being tried to make use of buildings and campuses all year round. Class and laboratory schedules are being examined for useable slack time.

The financial plight of higher education has attracted the attention and increasing support of alumni, foundations and corporations. Colleges themselves are re-examining their tuition policies looking toward the production of more income.

At the same time fresh thought is being given to ways to make it possible for students and parents to pay higher tuitions. Colleges are revamping their scholarship, loan and job plans. Several states have introduced or enlarged scholarship programs and three states have developed agencies for making low-interest loans available to students.

These signs are all hopeful, but in several ways the steps being

taken are not long enough to cross the abyss. Let me cite several examples. If both independent and public institutions are to flourish and expand, the method of financing state institutions must change. At present the greatest deterrent to charging realistic tuitions at independent institutions is the low-tuition policy of public institutions. The desirability of this policy is open to serious question, particularly in those states which have what the economists call regressive taxation, that is, where the incidence of taxation falls proportionately more heavily on the poor than on the wealthy. In these states the poor subsidize the college education of the rich. Even in states where taxation is not regressive, present tuitions and fees, when not ameliorated by scholarship programs, are a barrier to the higher education of the poor. I would suggest that both state and independent institutions should charge at the same realistic high levels. The states should then make ample tuition awards based on need to whatever proportion of high school graduates public policy dictates. The students should be allowed a free choice of college, public or private, at least within the state and perhaps, by arrangement, elsewhere. This plan has advantages for the student but even greater advantages for the state. The expansion of existing independent institutions, which it should engender, will be less costly than the creation of new public institutions. With tuitions at high levels colleges should be able to meet their operating costs. Plant funds will still have to come from legislatures or from donors.

The new attention being given to loans will be helpful to colleges but it will be unnecessarily hard on students and parents. Economists have pointed out that prepayment is much less costly than post-payment. In prepayment plans, you are paid interest for the use of your money. In loan plans you pay interest. In the one case interest works for you, in the other it works against you. But how are we to devise a workable prepayment plan? I submit



that if we view education as a disaster - a financial disaster - for the family, we can insure against it. I see difficulties but no serious reason why a "Blue Cross" type of insurance could not be set up for higher education. Matching contributions from employers would make an excellent channel for corporate support of education.

Somewhat similarly, our social security machinery (rather than our income-tax machinery, as has been proposed) could be used to make payments for college education as it now does for pensions. By employer and employee contributions of an additional percentage of salary the necessary funds could be built up.

I cite these three possibilities as examples of the kind of radical change which will be necessary if we are to weather the coming storm. No one of them may prove practical or desirable, but more thoroughgoing reforms than we are now talking about will be necessary.

Certainly the most fundamental reforms are required in education itself.

When the British surrendered to the Americans at Yorktown, the British band played "The World Turned Upside Down." The title of this piece has kept running through my head during the past months as I have tried to view the world and its needs and relate them to my own educational thinking.

A world that is right-side-up is not one in which any nation is top nation, but one in which peoples are joined in peace, trust and helpfulness and individuals are cherished and nourished in a favorable environment of institutions, ideas and sensations.

How different is the world today from this ideal! Heads of state taunt and wrangle while intercontinental missiles poise and intercontinental bombers circle, armed with infinite destruction. Geiger counters click off

the conscious injuries we perpetrate on future generations. Telescopes strain to see the first explosion on the moon while the naked eye overlooks gangs of children hunting each other in the brick and steel jungles of our cities. A smog of indifference settles over us while the guardians of conformity stir in the ashes and trample on the sparks of dissent.

Perhaps education is not to blame for the gap between the actuality and the ideal. Perhaps it is only that we have not had enough education for long enough. In part this is certainly true. The black picture I drew of the world today could be lightened with the bright strokes of undoubted progress due to education. And one can say with some assurance that more education, even of the same kind, would have made it brighter still.

And yet one cannot escape the strong feeling that education must accept a share of the responsibility. In an important way, education has always failed.

I am not endorsing the criticisms of education levelled at it in recent months. On the contrary, they seem to me to be either largely irrelevant to the aims of democratic education or in opposition to them. They are criticisms without criteria, or with the wrong criteria. They view education as a kind of international race against destruction by perfecting the ability to destroy. There is a Spartan rather than an Athenian quality to the criticism (and as Howard Mumford Jones has asked, "Who Remembers Sparta?"). There is an implied subordination of the individual to the state. There is a cold, harsh, angry tone to the critics' tirades which is not the note of philosophy.

I am of course sympathetic to their concern for the gifted child and to the more effective teaching of school subjects to those who will benefit from their study. But these are means to ends which may be either good or bad.

The failure I speak of in education is not a failure to transmit knowledge, but a failure to infect humanity with virtue.

This is a hoary problem. Religious and secular systems of education have risen and fallen without solving it. Perhaps it is true that knowledge and virtue are one and that only the steady erosion of ignorance by knowledge will bring universal virtue. Older men than I and older institutions than Bennington would have the sad wisdom not to try this guarded pass again. But what other educational endeavor is worthwhile? What other path to Athens is there?

Bennington College is a living reform. Its special chemistry defies quantitative or qualitative analysis, and yet those who have observed or experienced it know it is there. How we shall preserve it in the cloudy future, and how we shall spread its influence will be our constant concern.