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America's Energy Is Mindpower

By James L. Fisher

Shakespeare said: "To speak of substance before those who know you is both a privilege and an unsettling thing." Mindpower is much more than a slogan; it is a concept that must become an important part of the American consciousness. The events of Mindpower Week here in Washington and all across the nation, are intended to focus attention on the contributions and needs of education, to reinforce the idea that America's energy is mindpower, and our greatest and most precious resource, a knowledgeable, inquisitive, and enlightened citizenry. If there is a way out of our human dilemma, and I believe there is, it will be our most nearly rational American institution which will show the way.

For a moment let us think of why we are assembled [at Howard University]: What is a university? It was John Masefield who said it so well:

There are few earthly things more beautiful than a university. It is a place where those who hate ignorance may strive to know, where those who perceive truth may strive to make others see; where seekers and learners alike, banded together in the search for knowledge, will honor thought in all its finer ways, will welcome thinkers in distress or in exile, will uphold ever the dignity of thought and learning and will exalt standards in these things.

It is our obligation, indeed our duty, to insure the future of our educational institutions as safe havens where the search for and interpretation of truth can proceed without restraint and the creation and appreciation of beauty can be nurtured and encouraged.

But social and economic conditions are converging to make this ideal more difficult to attain.

Since Ronald Reagan was swept into office by a landslide victory, reams have been written about why. Some feel the voters were indicating their enthusiastic endorsement; others, merely a choice between two evils. According to one pollster, Patrick Caddell, it was a "massive protest vote." The reasons cited for this frustration are invariably the economy, taxes, employment, national prestige, and an emotional mix of moral and immoral (depending on individual position) majority views.

It is interesting to me that no one has yet talked or written (at least not for popular consumption) about the broader condition of our society as we contend with these events. In the United States we have always had problems — from a revolutionary beginning and a period of national assertion, to isolation and finally to the position of being a world power. Internally, we have had panics, depressions, civil war, racial and ethnic tension, corruption, violence, and more.

I submit that the problems of the '80s are really no greater or more threatening than at other periods in our history except in one basic and dramatic way that has, to date, eluded the sharp and sensitive minds of those who analyze and write about our times. The basic problem: According to some of the best assessments, a majority of us have lost confidence in our American institutions — institutions that both bind us together and inspire us — government, business, education, religion, the family. The very fabric of our society is being torn apart.

Since that history-making election, [of Reagan], there are still those who wonder whether a society that has virtually lost its values can adequately address problems at all.

I say we can.

But, if there is to be a future society of order, reason, and personal freedom (and I strongly believe there will be), people [with higher education] must be in the vanguard of its leaders. I believe that, as we commence the process of taking an honest look at ourselves and thereby set in motion a national design for renaissance, as I have suggested, it will be higher education — the most nearly rational and selfless of all American institutions — that will show the way. It is for this reason that our institutions are precious and their work so important.

But where are we today in education — particularly higher education? What is our condition as we prepare for this social imperative? We must be both realistic and optimistic. We are plagued by (1) the disconcerting and often debilitating problems of enrollment decline — about which most are doing next to nothing (This area is projected to experience more than a 40% decline in the number of high school graduates by 1990); (2) declining support in an inflationary economy; (3) a still flaccid curriculum — bequeathed to us by the overly-democratized period of the '60s and '70s; (4) increasing government control, both federal and state; and (5) most recently, the drastic government spending cuts proposed by the Reagan administration and passed by a nervous and uncertain Congress.

I think few, save the most naive or uninformed, question the seriousness of our condition. Is there hope? I believe there is.

We have begun to accept as fact that we will not be able to regain public support or defend against government encroachment if we don't first set our own house in order. Recommendations and plans have been developed that urge a renaissance for American higher education. Voices of reform ask for institutions to re-examine their programs and do

away with those that are too "innovative" and unsound. They encourage our colleges and universities to restore admission standards, meaningful grades, and strong programs in the liberal arts. We are advised to review our mission and state our goals explicitly and in ways that are measurable. And all across the country, colleges and universities are beginning to act.

Yes, there is reason to believe that the future can be a bright one. But a bright future assumes that we have first honestly evaluated our academic condition; admitted our difficulties; and, if necessary, set in motion a design for institutional renewal. Then, and only then, will we be able to inspire support from those who are able to enhance our colleges and universities.

We are constantly reminded by tested and accomplished persons that the crisis is *real* and that the future will not be bright for all institutions. Those that do not prosper will be those that have placed insufficient emphasis on the content of their educational programs and their management designs. They will not have involved faculty, students, staff, and members of the college "family" in accomplishing the goals of the institution. They will have depended on sporadic efforts in government relations, fund raising, alumni relations, and public affairs rather than on a continuously developing program that emphasizes educational mission instead of institutional needs.

Those institutions that will prosper will be those that have worthy academic programs — programs based solidly in the liberal arts and only topped with the reality of the marketplace; those that are not swept off course by fads or passionate politics; and those whose presidents and chancellors are sufficiently sophisticated in institutional advancement and management techniques to measure up in the intense competition.

We face a monumental challenge, a challenge that calls for dramatic changes in leadership and participation at all levels — community, corporate, and government. I am confident of our ability to meet the challenge. Adversity always produces strong leadership. We *will* be successful because we *must* be.

Our success will depend in large part on our ability to depart from education's traditional path of seeking strictly academic solutions. But I fear we are not doing this. We gird ourselves with impressive data, organization, and personnel and continue to rely on the same tired tactics that have rendered us so embarrassingly impotent in the past. We continue to hold to the mistaken notion that merit alone will win the day.

Why is it, as Ernest Boyer of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has said, that higher education is the least effective voice in Washington today? Surely it's not because of our case. Everyone knows that education is important. But a case, a just cause, doesn't talk politics and doesn't attract public attention. We must recognize the milieu in which we work. We cannot continue to treat Congress like the campus academic senate. We must disabuse our colleagues of their erroneous notion that just because our cause is logical and indeed, noble, we will automatically have the respect and command the serious attention of our elected representatives or their appointees. We must learn the difference between importance and influence. We must make ourselves heard as never before, and we must go to the people.

We in education have received our mandate to reach for new heights of excellence, quality and importance. Each of us has a vital role to play in the reconstruc-

tion, recognition and appreciation of quality education in this nation. We must work hard to restore hope and confidence in this most precious institution that Chaucer called the "grandest of enterprises."

I conclude with the words of Masefield:

In these days of broken frontiers and collapsing values, when the dams are down and the floods are making misery, when every future looks somewhat grim and every ancient foothold has become something of a quagmire, whenever a university stands, it stands and shines; whenever it exists, the free minds of men, urged on to full and fair inquiry, may still bring wisdom into human affairs. □

James Fisher, Ph.D., is president of the Council for Advancement and Support of Education. The above was excerpted from remarks he made at a Mind-power Breakfast at Howard University on October 8 sponsored by the Office of the Vice President for Development and University Relations.