New Directions

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Partnership in Education

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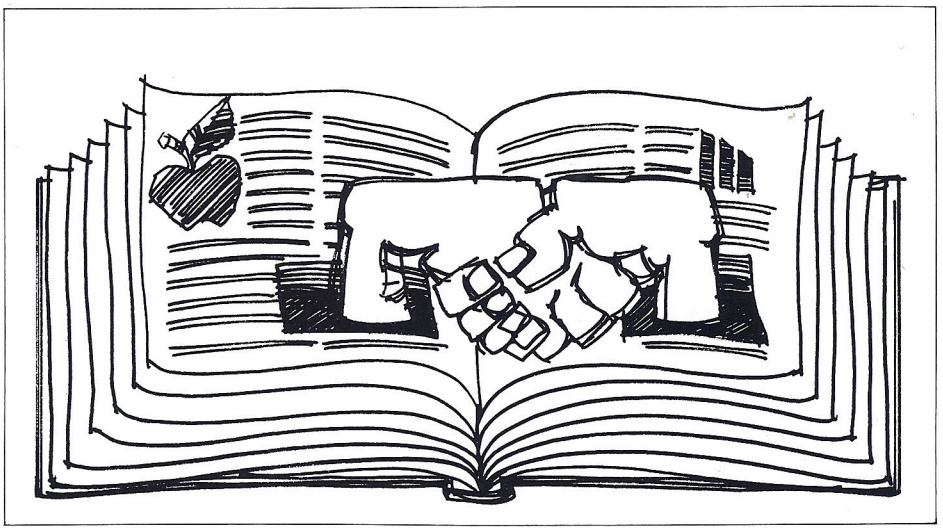

ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES A. DAVIS

The historian Tacitus defined patriotism as praiseworthy competition with one's ancestors. I recall this description of the civic passion because it reminds us that the civic purpose of education is to challenge and equip each new generation to do something as significant, as meaningful, and even as extraordinary in its own time as its ancestors accomplished at another time.

This generation of students lives between two worlds—an old order which is dying but not yet dead, and a new order which is conceived but not yet born.

Rarely in human history has there been a more concentrated focus on the nature of the social contract between a society and it people. Rarely has there been so much confusion about the role of the university. Is education to be primarily for citizenship or primarily for a career? Should it primarily introduce societal values and seek to expand social vision, or should it focus primarily on the development of skills and specific competencies?

The present debate reminds me of a story told me once by an elderly but stately-looking gentleman from West Africa. I was in Kenya for a United Nations Conference where I served as chairman of the American delegation and vice president of the general assembly. During a break from the formal proceedings, I struck up a conversation with a West African delegate. He told me that the present predicament of the American people reminded him of the situation of his village 50 years ago.

Startled by this comparison, I listened intently as he described how, for centuries, the local villagers sailed small boats on the river at their doorstep. During all this time, the economy and culture of the village depended upon fishing, preparing and cooking the products of the river, growing food in soil fertilized and irrigated by the river, building boats and appropriate tools for navigating the river.

Education in the village focused primarily on preparing young people for the economic roles and aspirations of life in a river culture. So long as life remained essentially the same, so long as no wars, invasions or natural disasters upset the even rhythm of life, their strategies were correct and the role of education was simple.

But the reason I cite the old man's story is that while he and other village leaders pursued their preoccupation with the past, they discovered one day that a few miles upstream men were constructing a huge dam that would soon dry up the river. Suddenly the villagers' design for the future, the educational strategies on which their survival was based, became dangerously out of date. Tomorrow would no longer simply be a repeat of yesterday.

This, in too many ways, is the predicament of American higher education. Up river, changes are taking place which threaten to fundamentally alter our institutions and our world. The future will require greater cooperation between business and the academic community. But we will need to distinguish between the short-term needs of the marketplace and the long-term needs of society. We will need to balance our concern with economics and efficiency with a renewed concern with excellence and equity.

A New Excellence

When I reflect on what made my undergraduate experience in a Black college unique, I am persuaded that there was a institutional ethos which balanced cognitive knowing with affective being. I learned not only how to think critically but how to feel another person's pain and share another person's burden. And it is this emphasis on balancing competence with compassion—a concern for excellence with a concern for equity—which has given my educational experience its uniqueness. It is what I learned about my responsibility to the larger community which has shaped the vision and values I have taken to each professional assignment—in education, in business and in government.

At a time when many colleges have simply emphasized preparation for the future, those who teach in predominantly Black colleges have had the audacity to excite young people about how to live in the present. This is the basic essence which must be preserved as we debate the role of the predominantly Black university in an interdependent world.

In a resource-scarce society, the public will support only those institutions which can demonstrate that what they do is not only in the public interest, but essential to the public well-being.

So the historic commitment to a very special kind of excellence is threatened by demands for vocational utility. All around us we see an increased emphasis on equipping students with "employable skills." But like life in a river culture, these skills are for jobs which are often tied to the rhythm of life; many of them may disappear by the end of the century. This means that our universities will have to man the barricades against excessive specialization and narrow careerism. Not only will they have to deal with reduced financial resources and reduced numbers of students of traditional college age, but they will have to cope with an educational climate in which a disproportionate number of students will want to major in a very few fields.

Business, pre-law and computer sciences are the darling disciplines of the new-vocationalists; but while predominantly Black colleges must respond to the demand that education be useful, they must do so not by an unholy preoccupation with occupational curricula but by combining liberal education with specific competencies.

Our colleges will need to produce graduates who can read well, write well, think clearly, exercise the capacity for synthesis and creativity and cope with a changing environment. To do so, it will be necessary to attract, retain and stimulate the excitement of a faculty which is willing to make a special effort to break down the artificial barriers between disciplines, between academics and the larger social milieu, and between colleges and the external publics to whom we are responsible.

It is against this backdrop that institutions like Howard must shape a curriculum for the future. They must provide for historically disadvantaged Americans both the resources for dignity and the capacity for self-assertion.

Albert Camus, the French intellectual who was born in North Africa, once defined a true rebel as "one who knows in behalf of what he is rebelling altogether as much as against what he is rebelling." Archibald MacLeish made the same point when he said: "A people who have been bound together because they stood *for* something cannot long retain their unity when they find they are merely *against* something." Our colleges must continue to be the carriers of the tradition and dispensers of the ideas which will enable us to focus not only on what we must be against but what we must be for.

New Forms of Equity

Predominantly Black colleges, regardless of their racial composition, must not only be an advocate for a new excellence but must set the standards and assist in the development of strategies for new forms of equity. It has been more than 100 years since our forefathers were emancipated from slavery, but here we are [today] still struggling to establish justice. The reason is more simple than many are willing to admit. The freed slaves were granted political rights but denied the economic benefits necessary to transform rights into privileges.

So, more than 100 years later, our challenge is to transform a political system based on equality of participation in its politics into an economic system based on equality in the distribution of its benefits. This means that no historically Black college has the luxury of turning out graduates who do not understand how our political and economic system works. We have so long defined the problems of Black and poor people in the language of civil rights that we tend to focus on marginal institutions of social service rather than some of the more fundamental opportunities for economic advancement.

In the '60s, one had only to be brave enough to face billy clubs and cattle prods to desegregate lunch counters and integrate public places. In the '80s, one will have to do better analysis if one is to successfully influence public policy. In the '60s, the battle was to reach and touch the public conscience. In the '80s, the battle will be over how the economy functions and who benefits.

When I took my students out of their college classes to do voter registration in Mississippi and Alabama, there was a drama and excitement which enabled us to maintain a special kind of cohension and commitment. But analyzing budget documents, monitoring procurement practices and participating in the debate about economic policy have none of the romanticisms of the '60s. They are not as dramatic as street marches in Alabama or as exciting as sit-ins in North Carolina, but they are crucial to the future well-being of Black America and, therefore, central to the mission of predominantly Black colleges.

In short, the challenge of the '80s will be for their graduates to use the critical faculties of the mind as effectively as another generation used the physicial endurance of the body. The Black minister will have to understand the world in which his parishioners function as well as the metaphysical tradition which comes out of the uniqueness of their past. The Black politician will have to understand economic and energy policies as well as the psychology of mass appeal. Even the gifted athlete will have to be able to think as well as run, and be creative as well as physical.

Training for Employment

In placing emphasis on the goals of excellence and equity, I do not mean to overlook the important role that our academic institutions play in training those they educate for future employment. Planning a curriculum that keeps pace with the rapidly-changing employ-

ment picture in our post-industrial society is surely one of the major challenges facing educators today.

It seems that in the '70s we spent a great deal of time and money training young people to run swiftly and gracefully into the brick wall of overcrowded or obsolete professions. How did we end up in the '80s with too many elementary school teachers and too few geriatric nurses? Educators must bear some of the responsibility for the disappointment of their graduates who have been forced to relinquish the concept of employment as a source of personal satisfaction and settle for jobs that are only a source of revenue.

I would suggest that it is the special responsibility of educational leaders to devote an increased share of their time and energy to a careful analysis of demographic and economic trends and to thoughtful consideration of what the country will look like 20, 30 or more years down the road. And if they are to prepare young people with confidence for the future workplace, they must begin to collaborate more closely with the leaders of America's corporate sector in assessing the areas of knowledge that are compatible with technological developments already underway.

Those in the forest and lumber industry are accustomed to planning in 30-year cycles. While planning for the productive use of human resources is a far more complex business than planning for natural resource, we can at least begin to approach the issue with the same level of commitment and creativity as those who look toward future profits.

I do not mean to imply that educators can or should attempt to "turn out products" ready to march straight from their school desks to corporate desks. Employers themselves should be prepared to provide the specific training necessary for career development. However, by cooperating in their planning, the two sectors can begin to ensure a closer match between future employment opportunities and the kind of academic preparation needed to take advantage of them.

In considering the role of educators in preparing their students for employment, I think it is important to dispel the myth that minority youth should be trained primarily for social service programs in the non-profit sector. Our goal should be to provide the tools necessary to gain access to the mainstream of the marketplace rather than the margins of the economy. Enterprise development, petroleum engineering, geology, forestry and land management must all be part of the new curriculum if we are to prepare our young people for new opportunities for employment.

Having spent so much time handing out homework assignments for colleges and universities, I feel that it is only appropriate to conclude with a few words about the broader responsibilities which all of society must share if our educational institutions are to be marked by excellence, equity, and appropriate preparation for the future.

The first point that must be made has to do with the present debate about which jurisdiction of government has which responsibility. We must continue to stand for a shared responsibility between the federal government and state and local jurisdictions. But on issues of access and quality, there can be no equivocation about the responsibilities of the federal government. If we are to stand for anything as a people, we must stand for quality education and financial assistance for all students without regard to family income, race, national origin, sex or handicapping condition.

Educating our youth is as much in the national interest as defending our interests abroad. Training them for a world of work is part of the historic obligation of one generation to another. But we cannot afford to be doctrinaire about either the public or private sector, local or federal jurisdictions. A truly compassionate people will ensure that all institutions—private and public, profit and non-profit—will serve the public good.

A second point which must be made is that the present concern with efficiency cannot be dismissed as antithetical to the concern with equity. All of us have a stake in efficiency. Ill-arranged, unorganized and inefficient programs hurt those who are the recipients of services far more than those critics whose only concern is with the cost of the services. The issue is not whether fiscal prudence is in our self-interest, but how to balance this necessary concern with our long-standing commitment to social justice.

Finally, given the reduction of federal resources available to education, we must focus increased attention on the development of new financing mechanisms. If innovation and experimentation with new methods are to remain features of our educational system, public tax revenues must be supplemented with funds from the private sector. I would suggest that this is a particularly appropriate area of philanthropic concern for those businesses and corporations that depend upon academic institutions for a well-educated workforce.

The uniqueness of those who benefit from liberal learning is that they should be restless in the presence of mediocrity. To paraphrase a favorite Kennedy quotation, some in our generation look to the past and ask why, but the exposure to a liberal education should make us look to the future and ask why not? In the same spirit, it is now time for us to ask "why not excellence?" "Why not equity?" "Why not human values?" "Why not social vision?" "Why not employable skills?"

The debate which poses one against the other is not only counterproductive but just plain wrong. Education for citizenship not only prepares a literate society but equips each new generation for the world of work. □

James Joseph is the president of the Council on Foundations.