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ENLIGHTENED PUBLIC POLICY TOWARD LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION  
IN THE 1980s: HOW TO ACHIEVE IT

"Enlightened public policy toward liberal arts education in the 1980s and how to achieve it." To be true to that awesome title would require inordinate courage, voluminous research and immoderate prescience. With that caveat let me begin.

To debate public policy, it is important to remind ourselves of the parameters within which we currently operate. The history of American higher education began with John Harvard importing to America the concept and framework of his homeland. Thus was established the tradition of a four-year pursuit of a bachelors degree which has persisted for 350 years. No small irony that the standard in England subsequently changed to three years. Over the past 100 years, we have further atomized higher education with a proliferation of courses on narrower and narrower subjects.

A century ago puberty and entry into the work force occurred at approximately the same time. Our children now mature earlier and enter the job market later. Today, we educate, protect, and even divert from the work force physically mature youngsters for six to eight years.

The world of knowledge grows exponentially, but the time

frame of education remains unchanged. What a young adult knows today comes increasingly from non-selective, unsupervised, mind-numbing television. Unfortunately, the same adjectives can too often be used to describe our secondary schools.

Teaching methods remain basically unchanged, even though our institutions are inundated by new waves of students. A generation nurtured on television collides with middle-aged learners seeking to finish a long-interrupted education, while the drought of youngsters advances. Many educators view with dismay the diminishing ranks of high school seniors. Hucksterism intensifies as institutions seek to retain their share of what is viewed as a shrinking pool. The total demand for education, however, is clearly rising.

Peter Drucker, in a recent Wall Street Journal article, put it well when he said, "What is going down and fairly fast, is demand for traditional education in traditional schools. Indeed, the fastest growing industry in America today may be the continuing professional education of highly schooled, mid-career adults. Much of it takes place outside the education establishment--through companies, hospitals, and government bureaus that run courses for managerial and professional employees, or through management associations and trade associations. Meanwhile, any number of private entrepreneurs are organizing seminars and courses, producing training films and audio tapes, and otherwise taking advantage of growth opportunities that university faculties shy away from."

If history and demography have brought us to this troublesome point in American education, then so too has our uncertain economy. The cry for "relevance" which flooded our institutions in the 1960s has ebbed. Today the battle cry is "will it get me a job?" The explosive growth of community colleges has accentuated this trend. Most of all, employers today seek the technician, the specialist, the narrowly educated who will fill an equally narrow slot. Even as enthusiasm for the new vocationalism rises, serious questions are beginning to be raised. One of the most devastating recently surfaced in Time magazine's cover story on graduate business education. At best, the reviews were mixed, and not all were as negative as the executive who said, "There have got to be some people who go to Harvard Business School and aren't ruined by the experience." Other chief executive officers show a growing perception that technical training isn't enough. Listen to them: "The MBA is not a necessity, and for some people it is probably a waste of time. I've seen some MBA's flop because of their personal characteristics," or "They have great ambition, great minds, love to do things, but they just don't have the competence, maturity, or capability to do them. They don't understand what is doable versus what is idealistic," and "We are slowing the pace in recruiting MBA's, they can be too bottom-line oriented, looking inward, rather than looking outward. MBA's can be impatient and they can be a bit condescending toward others." All of these

chief executives are MBA's themselves. While these comments may represent the early signals leading to a different focus in higher education, vocationalism is still the overwhelming emphasis today.

Even with this recitation of history and current woes of American higher education, it is difficult to suggest public policy toward liberal education without some analysis of liberal education itself. This meeting has been devoted to examination of individual elements of liberal education. We, as others before us, argue convincingly over a core curriculum and what constitutes an educated person, forgetting at times that we cannot apply a single learning method to all students, and that students come to us from widely varied cultural backgrounds. These two questions: what we teach and how we teach, are being asked with increasing frequency and are at the heart of any debate over public policy in higher education. Given today's vast array of knowledge, it seems illogical to demand that all students follow a common path. A core curriculum of a century ago could reasonably encompass the fundamentals of human knowledge, at least from the perspective of Western civilization. Today that's impossible. Since students are embarking on a lifetime of learning, shouldn't the common thread be in process, rather than program? These are the processes of clear and concise communication, analytical thinking, problem solving ability, and a thorough understanding of how to learn in an organized sense on

completion of formal education. But with the arrogance of tradition, we force virtually all students through the litany of lecture, note-taking, memorizing, and regurgitating all in term-end examinations. Education is too often passive and allows little opportunity for student initiative or for the real stretching of our intellect.

Obviously, much of American education is better than described here, but there seems to be a weariness, a defensive mentality arising from the stupendous task of educating our crop of post-war babies. No longer overwhelmed by numbers, we may now be able to readdress ourselves to the priorities of education.

With this pointed and necessarily abbreviated introduction, let me now speak more directly of public policy toward liberal education. It is impossible to achieve new goals alone. It is imperative that there be a renaissance of learning in the high schools of America or the level of college education will surely erode. The comprehensive high school of yesterday has given way to fortresses under siege in our major cities. Harassed and overburdened teachers pass students automatically, and even the best are often unprepared for college work on graduation. The shocking truth is that too often the worst and least prepared of our college students are choosing teaching as a career. The teacher education programs are woefully weak and even the best and brightest of our young teachers are shunted aside by legislative reductions in educational support, coupled with the seniority system. Propositions 13, 2½, and a myriad of others have combined to cripple

American secondary education.

New policies toward liberal education must start with our high schools. The Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education, in one of its last studies, attempted to analyze all the options of youth in relationship to higher education. The survey dramatized the results of prolonged teen-age dependency. Dropout rates from high school, 23%; deficiencies in language and numerical skills among high school graduates, 20%; 50% of all arrested are under 25 years of age; and 50% of all unemployment is among those under 25 years of age. We are in danger of permanently dividing our society at a young age, into the haves and have nots. If the same percentage of "most able" students from low income families entered college as from the most affluent 25%, we would increase college enrollment by 100,000 students per year. In addition, current legislative policies may help distort our educational priorities. States invest hundreds of millions of dollars in admittedly needed educational aid for the handicapped, but virtually nothing in extra support for gifted children. Our penchant for egalitarianism may cheat us of an opportunity to challenge the best of our young.

These statistics led the Council to suggest broader alternatives for youth, including making 16 the age of choice. Choice whether to leave school, or to enter the military service as an educational trainee, to be an apprentice, or potentially to speed college entrance. There would be no early "tracking" of students toward an academic or vocational career. Basic educational skills would be emphasized,

although the comprehensive high school of today would be traded for a new breed of urban institution. Each would specialize in some major field of endeavor and concentrate both capital and teaching resources. Students could spend a portion of the week at a home school engaged in fundamental studies and then travel to a specialty institution to develop strong skills in a subject of their choice. The Carnegie Commission is now involved in a major study aimed at restoring the viability of high school education. There are many options being analyzed.

Let me suggest one potential alternative to today's high school-college interface. Concentrate the fundamentals of high school education into the first three years of study. Utilize the fourth year as an opportunity for specialization for those headed directly for the work force or for apprenticeship for those interested in the crafts. Community colleges could provide the home for these opportunities. College-bound seniors would polish their skills in critical reading, comprehensive writing, analytical thinking and show their readiness to work at college levels by year-end comprehensive examinations. Able students could prove their abilities at the beginning of their senior year and enter directly into higher education. Colleges and universities could cease their time-consuming efforts spent on remedial education. The potential effects on liberal education would be dramatic. Imagine receiving freshmen, all of whom were ready and equipped to respond to college level teaching and subject matter. Whether this or

alternative ideas prevail, it is crucial that an effective college preparatory curriculum be an important prerequisite to an improved liberal education.

Of equal importance to fully prepared freshmen is an institutional sensitivity to our changing American culture. The European homogeneity of colonial times has given way to an increasingly multi-cultural society. Native American tribal pride is being reasserted. Southeast Asian immigrants with intense motivation flock to our high schools. Black and Hispanic parents seek expanding educational opportunities for their children. Los Angeles is now 30% Hispanic and many Eastern and Southern cities are 50-70% Black. Some studies predict that 30% of our youngsters will be non-white or Hispanic by the year 2000. Our continued strength as a nation depends on our understanding and respect for our varied cultures.

The traditional curricular emphasis on Western civilization should now be broadened. Cultural literacy is an important, but generally unrecognized, ingredient of a true liberal education. The ethnic studies of the 1970's were an insufficient response to our changing society. All programs and courses should be reviewed to insure against cultural bias. More importantly, cultural awareness, understanding, and ultimately literacy must typify the best of liberal education in the decade ahead.

Quality liberal education must play an important role in the renewal of secondary education. Tomorrow's teachers are today's undergraduates struggling through programs long on process and short on substance. We can revitalize our teacher education by



emphasizing high performance in fundamental writing and analytical skills. Majors should be comprehensive within the framework of a full liberal education. Entry must be highly selective, even in times of declining enrollment. Teaching methods are important but most can best be learned through cadet teaching carefully supervised. None of these suggestions are dramatic, but few institutions fully respond to these measures which are vital to a restoration of our nation's teaching corps.

If process typifies secondary teacher education, then osmosis describes most college teacher education. A graduate student becomes a teaching assistant and is thrown into a classroom with little direction. Armed with a terminal degree, a graduate trades one campus for another and begins a teaching career. Some teach brilliantly, many do not.

Communication is the core of teaching ability. I've been struck by the consistency with which participants in the APEP program have described communication skills. The simplest perhaps was "presenting the message clearly, logically, and concisely." Yet, if government regulations hold the record for obfuscation, then running a close second is the convoluted and tedious prose of many academicians. More specific attention should be given to regular teaching evaluation of faculty. Deans and faculty peers must assume a greater responsibility for teaching quality and the necessary development to improve competence. Even student measurement of teaching, admittedly controversial, can be of great value if properly

guided. Tenure, advancement in rank, even retention, should depend, at least in part, on carefully analyzed teaching ability.

Opportunities for faculty to spend sabbatical periods in alternative work experiences would add new breadth to teaching capacities. The interchange between business, government, and the university, enhances the progress of both corporation and campus.

The role liberal education plays in the 1980's will certainly depend on more than teaching the typical 18 to 21 year old undergraduate. As the number of young shrink, the importance of the adult student grows. Many return to school seeking specialty training to compete better in an uncertain economy. In fact, many will be best served by the intellectual challenge of liberal education. Exemplary programs exist today which vividly demonstrate this trend. Carefully crafted upper division liberal arts programs offer necessary educational breadth to a technical arts graduate of a community college. Special studies for re-entry women offer an opportunity to build renewed confidence in their ability to achieve a baccalaureate degree. Short term, weekend, and vacation college offerings draw increased audiences of students returning for the joy of additional learning. In a tense and complex world, this chance to refresh the mentally exhausted may be the most challenging task of all.

The awarding of a baccalaureate degree does not automatically make one a truly educated person. In today's complex world it is probably unachievable, short of a lifetime of growth. Undergraduate education can, however, sharpen and identify the tools necessary for continued

learning. Too many institutions begin that education by packaging freshmen into huge lecture halls for passive listening, with too little opportunity for challenge. The rewards of close contact with faculty is reserved for the upper division student. Logic seems to indicate that the opposite should be the case. Give freshmen the special help to initiate their learning career. Demand freshmen seminars which would regularly require students to participate actively in challenging each other and learning to defend a thesis. Provide careful and personal analysis of writing skills and help develop abilities to communicate in a variety of formats. Introduce students to effective use of the reference library. Offer a real opportunity to sample educational disciplines and learn something of their inter-relationship.

Equipped with a firm basis, upper division students should be able to work more independently. Major projects, internships, individual research contracts, all should be encouraged to stretch advanced students' intellectual capacities.

Some well endowed liberal arts institutions now offer beginning students these personalized opportunities. Almost any institution, public or private, could do the same with sensitive rearrangement of course and teaching assignments.

The review of institutional mission is important in this era of shrinking resources. Many schools, fearing enrollment declines, grab for any new program that is perceived as a student draw. No successful enterprise can be all things to all students. Candid self-examination

is an important prerequisite to survival in these turbulent years. If that examination suggests shrinkage as the most prudent course, then prune so that the remaining core has clear and rational goals and a real reason for existence. In the vernacular "Better small, than not at all."

All of education is under close financial scrutiny by both private benefactors and legislative bodies. Public institutions turn increasingly to private donations from alumni, foundations, and corporations. Private institutions utilize public funds for survival. Federal student aid, government subsidies for housing, publicly financed research grants, all make private institutions more public. Plans to share resources and develop partnership programs between public and private schools can attract favorable response from donors and legislators.

*But* financial health of education does not depend on a larger share of the nation's financial pie during the next decade. A steady share of gross national product is an achievable and sufficient goal. Success in achieving that goal depends, not only on high quality programs, but public perception of the intelligence, prudence, and innovation of educational management.

We have developed a massive educational system <sup>*the worlds largest*</sup> populated by thousands of courses, both exotic and mundane. Students strive for increasingly narrow specialities and too often we encourage them in that desire. Biologically, we learn that over-specialized plants and animals cannot survive, even a small change in their environment.

Small wonder that human specialists fail, too, as conditions around them change. Enlightened liberal education policy must set forth clearly the challenge beyond specialization. While no course of study can impart total knowledge to any student, a successful liberal education can be measured by certain important attributes. Included are the opening of new vistas of knowledge and acquisition of intellectual skills to equip a graduate for a lifetime of growth. Learning should become an exciting, not stultifying process. Formal education has been a failure if a person ceases to grow, question, inquire, and challenge once graduation occurs. For them commencement is more accurately conclusion.

While no one would deny the importance of specialty knowledge, the breadth of liberal education can make a specialist better. As between two equally trained physicians, give me one who understands how to communicate with a patient; of two engineers, one with a sense of aesthetics; of two businessmen, one who is a philosopher; and of two politicians, one who has a clear and comprehensive knowledge of history.

How do we convince the public of the importance of this liberal education? Much depends on our ability to predict changing educational needs of the future. Suitable policies ought to be valid for a variety of future scenarios. While we may not be able to predict with any accuracy, the future trends of higher education, we can say with some assurance that change will be the constant.

During the past fifteen years, student pressures and choice have shifted radically. The social awakening of the mid-60's was followed

Thoughtful leaders are needed who are educated in history, aware of human consequences of this new age, and perceptive of its potential.

Leaders are needed to help restore the sagging confidence in our traditional institutions; leaders to reach for new cultural and artistic horizons; leaders to give new sensitivity to political affairs; all can rise from a renewed emphasis on liberal education.

The elements of policy discussed above are not dramatic and, for the most part, are not even external to higher education. Those who seek a "quick fix" or a simple answer to the future of liberal education will be bitterly disappointed.

Teacher preparation, flexibility of time and method, cohesion in programs, cultural literacy, public/private partnerships, are goals which depend on us. Public policy toward liberal education is more accurately public perception of liberal education. Our task is two-fold:

First to build strength internally based on a solid and consistent belief in liberal education. <sup>Do we really?</sup> Second, to let the world know of the values and success of liberal education. Tell of the poet who is a Senator, the philosopher CEO, the lawyer historian, and the artist physician.

Our young liberal arts institution is just 10 years old. I speak frequently of our three legislator graduates, <sup>of 90% success rate of graduates</sup> of our young business entrepreneurs, of budding scientists, of doctors, lawyers, radicals and conservatives, all contributing to the vitality of their communities. <sup>applicants to Med. School</sup>

Many are technically skilled and specially trained, but all have the fundamental base of a liberal education and a continued delight in learning.

Do we attempt to broaden ourselves in the way we ask students to

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When <sup>the</sup> President and chief executive officers, editors and parents speak up on behalf of the values of liberal education because they are convinced, appropriate public policy will follow.

The 1980's ought not to be either a time of despair nor educational retreat. The challenge is one of quality, not just survival. Your efforts are symbolic of many devoted to improving an already fine American liberal arts education. We may not be as good as we ought to be, but are a lot better than we sometimes think we are.