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RESURRECTION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Theodore M. Hesburgh

"The centuries-old love affair of American society with higher education [has] turned cold," says the president of Notre Dame. Now, at the time of greatest opportunity and direst financial crisis, colleges and universities are "spurned by the very people who created them, confided their children to them, supported them, and looked to them for a solution to everything difficult." The Reverend Dr. Hesburgh focuses on the steps necessary to recapture public support.

DURING THE PAST FEW YEARS, higher education in this country—and throughout the world—has undergone a baptism of fire. Many books have been and will be written to assess why it happened. The more thoughtful persons will ask what may be learned from all that happened. Those perennially endowed with hope (as indeed college and university administrators must be) will now inquire, Where do we go from here?

Looking to the future implies, of course, that internal revolution, violence, vulgarity, and disintegration within the institutions of higher education have peaked out, that the high-water mark has been reached, and that the waters of contradiction are subsiding. No one can be certain that this assumption is correct. One can only surmise that a phenomenon that came upon us unsuspectedly, with the speed of summer lightning, and all of a sudden engulfed the whole world of higher learning may leave in the same rapid way. Whether or not it will is still surmise and assumption and hope.

The only certainty at this point in time is that the onslaught of the past several years has left a lot of wreckage. Most of the past distinguished presidents are no longer in their posts. Certainly many of them, after long years of service during which they presided over unprecedented growth in their institutions, must now experience some bitter memories of their final days, when everything seemed to come apart all at once, when a life of reason was suddenly smothered by blind emotion, when a place of calm civility was engulfed by violence, bombings, burnings, vandalism, and vulgarity.

I believe that what went wrong went wrong globally. The universities of Tokyo, London, Paris, Berlin, and Rome were as disturbed and disrupted as Berkeley, Harvard, Columbia, Cornell, and Wisconsin. The disorder was due in part to a wave of history, still not well understood; part could be charged to serious mistakes on the part of the total enterprise of higher education. Overall, it soon reached a crisis of credibility, of legitimacy, of authority, of frustrated expectations. In large measure, it was the kind of abnormal convolution of heightened tensions and conflicting convictions that characterize every revolution, when the traditional consensus is eroded and the supportive pillars that depend upon

free consensus become suddenly unstable, and total collapse ensues.

Certainly there were no standard solutions. During one brief period, one president lost out because he called in the police, and another fell because he did not. I asked one great president how he had survived a difficult crisis, and he answered, "Each morning when I dragged myself from bed, I asked myself, 'What is the worst thing I could do today?' and I didn't do it."

Explosive mixture

However one explains the worldwide revolution in higher education, in the American institutions all the usual problems were exacerbated by the Vietnam war, racial conflict, sudden realization of the plight of the poor in the midst of plenty, wastage and pillage of our national resources, the horrible state of national priorities as reflected in the federal budget, and, in general, by the increasingly dismal quality of our national life. Having made little progress in their assault on racial injustice and the inanity of the Vietnam war, the young—an unprecedented proportion of whom were now college and university students for a variety of right and wrong reasons—turned their frustrations on the institution closest to hand, their college or university. The other problems continued in their grinding way, so that the new revolution fed upon itself as frustration here was heightened by impatience there, and impatience there by frustration here.

There was enough wrong within the colleges and universities, too, so that we soon had an ever more explosive mixture awaiting simple ignition. There were plenty of volunteers to light the match. Every succeeding explosion on one campus ignited others elsewhere. And so it went across the country from West to East, and back again. Few institutions escaped unscarred, some were profoundly changed, and all were affected in one way or another. Some looked in the face of death, and that more than anything else may have accounted for the *détente*.

The question is: What, really, was wrong within the colleges and universities that fueled the fires of revolution? Strangely enough, we were the victims of our own success. Higher education in its earlier American version grew slowly, from the beginning at Harvard in 1636 to a national total of 52,000 students in 1870. For the last century, this student body doubled roughly every 15 years. This was hardly a herculian task when the doubling meant going from 12,500 to 25,000 students, or from 25,000 to 50,000, or even from 50,000 to 100,000.

Lack of introspection

But by 1950, we had a base of 2.7 million which, in doubling to 5.5 million by 1965 (and now moving toward 11 million by the end of this decade), meant doing educationally in 15 years more than had been done in the last 330 years. We were all so busy growing and expanding, reaching toward the enrollment of half the age group in higher education, that we did not have time to ask whether what was good for 50,000, or 2 percent, of the college-age group in 1900, was equally good for 6.6 million, or 46 percent, of the college-age group in 1970.

Moreover, change during these latter decades has meant simply and mostly external expansion and growth, but not necessarily internal development—more of the same for ever greater numbers of students, more of the same kind of faculty teaching, the same kinds of courses. Such growth may make sense in the production of more hot dogs, but in higher education it certainly must mean more than simple reduplication of what is and has been.

Suddenly, the students asked the question we had all been too busy to ask, Does this whole enterprise, as now constituted, really provide a good education for everyone? Granted that their suggestions for internal change were not always an obvious move toward certain educational improvement, but they did start us looking more

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seriously at what we were doing. It is no secret that we were not always greatly pleased by what we saw.

Some of our most distinguished and highly compensated faculty were teaching less and less and seeing students only when unavoidable, while graduate students carried on the bulk of teaching for slave wages. New faculty, by the tens of thousands, were trained annually for research, engaged to teach, and most rewarded when they could negotiate lucrative contracts from government, industry, or foundations that took them away from both campus teaching and on-campus, course-related research that would involve them with their students. At one time four distinguished midwestern universities boasted that almost 400 of their faculty were overseas.

Internal disintegration

Administrators were getting their share of the bounty too: they were not only balancing their budgets with the ever-enlarging overhead funds from research contracts, but also traveling to see how overseas and other off-campus enterprises were coming along, and finding additional time to lend their distinguished presence to all manner of industrial, governmental, military, and other activities. Meanwhile, at home, liberal education, the core of the whole endeavor, became fragmented and devitalized, as subspecialty was heaped on subspecialty, and students learned more and more about less and less, and next to nothing about the great humanistic questions such as the meaning of life and death, war and peace, justice and injustice, love and hatred, art and culture.

Few educators even mentioned that the enormous growth in their student bodies did not include those who needed higher education most. To minority youth and children in the lower socioeconomic quartile of the population, a college degree was the essential ingredient to upward mobility; yet whatever their talent or promise, they had only a one-seventh chance of entering higher education in comparison with youngsters from the upper socioeconomic quartile.

The structure of higher education remained largely the same during the doubling and quadrupling of enrollments. Student questioning about governance caught most colleges and universities flat-footed. In their eagerness to reform, many institutions overcompensated so that, from being badly governed, they now emerged as largely ungovernable. Every decision now has to run the gauntlet of many potential vetoes both within and outside the university. This, too, compounds the internal problems, for even a wise man with some plausible solutions to assist the ailing institution might die of old age before seeing them realized.

Disappearing community

This account of internal problems is far from complete. In any consideration of *why* the revolution of the past few years, however, one more potent factor of failure must be cited. Most colleges and universities during, and possibly because of, their rapid growth, simply ceased to be communities. Almost everyone was culpable. Trustees were often unrepresentative of the total endeavor they ultimately sought to govern. One distinguished western university had a board of trustees that was consistently wealthy, male, white, aged, western, Republican, and Protestant. The obverse then reads that there were generally no middle- or lower-class trustees, no blacks or Chicanos or Orientals, no women or younger people, no Catholics or Jews, no middle-western, southern, or eastern members, and, generally, no Democrats. One might ask how such trustees can provide wisdom for a community that contained reasonably large numbers of all the elements not represented on the board.

One might also wonder why presidents and top administrators in higher education did not see the storm coming and strengthen their communities to meet it effectively. Obvious answers are that the storm burst suddenly and that the community had already been badly eroded. In actuality, the community had to be recreated, not simply strengthened, and the task was made the more difficult because part of the crisis was a lack of community and, often, the presence of an external quasi-community that lacked credibility, legitimacy, or even the will to govern itself.

If one must fault presidents and chancellors among others—and we must—it would have to be for a lack of moral leadership, not just in time of crisis, but more consistently in earlier and peaceful times. We too often were blind to the moral implications of unbridled growth that was certainly spectacular but of questionable educational value. We did not use our influence to move for more representative boards of trustees; greater rewards for those faculty concerned with students, teaching, and true educational reform and growth; more minority students; and stronger words at times for those students who clamored for responsible freedom but without behaving responsibly once they were granted greater freedom. We might also have labored more aggressively in the continuing education of our alumni who also were having their own new problems in understanding each new age and change.

Once we washed our hands of any moral concern for all that was happening in our academic communities, we reaped the harvest of a disintegrating community. I grant you that the great wisdom and courage required for moral leadership are not common qualities among men and women, but then neither are college or university presidencies common tasks. I grant as well that, in its early stages, disintegration of a community is almost imperceptible to all but the very wisest, and, as disintegration brings on a crisis of legitimacy and credibility, superhuman courage and charisma are needed to recreate what has been largely lost.

In any case, most presidents paid their individual price for a situation created by many, not least of all by the wild men among the student body, most of whom have now successfully graduated, and by some irresponsible faculty members who are still around now that the scapegoat has been driven into the desert. No need to lament further, only need to learn from all that happened. There is a gospel story of the man from whom a devil was driven, only to have him later repossessed by seven worse devils.

What then can we learn from all that has happened? First, I think moral leadership is as vital to a community as the participation of all its members in its healthy life and growth. *Participation* has been a most popular word since the crisis, but too little has been said about the moral imperatives of this participation. I have a strong belief that the central person in exercising moral leadership in the life and prosperity of any academic institution must be its president. He must, first and foremost, speak for the priorities that really count in academia. Presidential leadership demands that, for his speaking to be effective, he must somehow enlist the support of the various segments of the community. Otherwise he speaks only for himself and to himself—a combination that makes for bad leadership.

Presidential leadership

There is no charmed formula for presidential leadership. Each president must establish his own credibility. He will do this best by the goals which shine through his own life and activities. The day of Olympian detachment for presidents is over. If justice needs a voice, on campus or off, the president must have the wisdom and courage to say what must be said, and he must not be the last one to say it. If faculty or students need defense, he should be the first to defend them. If either or both need criticism, the president cannot avoid saying honestly and plainly what is wrong. If the learning process is lagging because of glacial progress in reforming curricula, structures, teaching, and inflexible, outmoded requirements, the president must remind the community of what is needed for educational growth and survival in today's world of unprecedented change. In all of these things his response must be firm and clear, because the times demand it. There was a time when a president was expected to be a lion abroad and a mouse at home. No longer.

The president, above all other members in the community, must portray respect for the mind and its special values, for true learning and culture, for humanity and humane concerns, for academic freedom, for justice and equality, in all that the uni-

versity or college touches, especially the lives of its students, faculty, and alumni. Of course, the name of the game is good communications on every level, at every opportunity, but I must insist that the president communicates best by what he is and what he does with his own life. If he has credibility, then the goals he proposes will be the extension of that credibility and the means of drawing the community into cohesion.

Moral dimension

Although the community is primarily academic, I submit once more that its basis of unity must be of the heart, as well as of the head. It was not merely intellectual problems that recently unraveled great institutions of learning across the world, but rather the dissipation of moral consensus, community, and concern. When members of a college or university stop caring about each other or their institution, or become unclear about personal or institutional goals, then community ceases to be and chaos results.

The mystique of leadership—be it educational, political, religious, commercial, or whatever—is next to impossible to describe, but wherever it exists, morale flourishes, people pull together toward common goals, spirits soar, and order is maintained, not as an end in itself, but as a means to move forward together. Such leadership always has a moral as well as an intellectual dimension; it requires courage as well as wisdom; it does not simply know, it cares. When a faculty and a student body know that their president really cares about them, they will follow him to the heights, even out of the depths.

Moreover, good leadership at the top inspires correlative leadership all down the line. "Participatory democracy" cannot mean simply endless discussion. Rather, if it is to work at all, it means that every member of the community, especially within his or her own segment of the community, exercises moral responsibility, especially when it hurts and when it demands the courage to say and do what may be unpopular. Student judicial courts will not survive if they never find anyone guilty or never impose adequate sanctions for obvious wrongdoing. Student government will soon enough lose all its credibility and acceptance, even from students, if its only concerns are freer sex, more parking, education without effort, and attainment of the heights of utopia without climbing. Faculty senates will be only debating societies if they never recognize the central faculty abuses and move effectively to correct them. Vice presidents, deans, and department chairmen do not exist to pass the buck upward and to avoid the difficult decisions. Leadership may be most important at the presidential level, but it is absolutely essential at every level—trustees, faculty, administrators, students, and alumni—if the community is to be equal to the tasks that lie ahead for each college and university and for the total enterprise of higher education in America.

Contemporary climate

Where do we go from here? First, we should clearly understand the climate that results from the events of the past five years in academia. For the first time in more than a century, the end of quantitative growth in higher education is in sight. Having doubled in size every 15 years during the last century, higher education will be leveling off by 1980, possibly slipping downward a bit. This latter movement is already perceptible in graduate education.

However, there is a more serious aspect to the climate in which we in higher education now live. After a century when the society at large could not do enough for universities and colleges, when these institutions represented the epitome of just about everyone's hopes, a degree being the closest earthly replica of the badge of salvation, suddenly the American public, our patron and faithful supporter, is rather completely disillusioned about the whole enterprise. They are, as they say, let down by the weak, vacillating, spineless presidents, their former darlings; they are disgusted by the ultra-liberal, permissive faculties, who were going to solve all of the world's problems, but could not solve their own. And, needless to say, they find the students revolting in more ways than one, despite the fact that these are their own sons and daughters, the prod-

ucts of the most primordial education of all that does or does not take place in the family.

It is paradoxical that at a time when the universities are being asked to solve more problems than ever before—urban blight, racial tensions, minority opportunity, generation gap, overseas development, environmental pollution, political participation by the young, forward motion in atomic energy and space, and a host of other concerns—at this same time our colleges and universities are misunderstood, abused, and abandoned as never before by government and foundations, by benefactors, parents, and alumni, and generally by the public at large.

A destroyed image

Obviously, the institutions—collectively, the members of the academic enterprise—are not blameless at this moment in time. I will not repeat the faults. Most dramatically, in the eyes of the public, the institutions that were supposed to have answers for everyone and everything had few answers for themselves and their own troubles; the citadels of reason fell to the assaults of mindless emotion; the centers of taste and civility spouted obscenities; the havens of halcyon peace and pranks saw within them violence, destruction, and even death.

Institutions in trouble were given extravagant coverage indeed in the media when they were at their worst. And, although the worst, in terms of delinquent persons and horrible events, represented a small bit of the total scene, the stereotypes stood out and tended to be universalized. The centuries-old love affair of American society with higher education suddenly turned cold. And now, at the time of greatest opportunity and direst financial crisis in institutions of higher education, all are spurned by the very people who created them, confided their children to them, supported them, and looked at them for a solution to everything difficult.

Perhaps one central problem is that the public was encouraged and allowed to place too much hope in these less than magical institutions, to expect too much of the endeavor, to be too confident of apparent omnipotence when, in fact, there are simply many important tasks that they cannot do without perverting what they were established to do. The collective educational enterprise is not the state or the church, the Red Cross, or the Peace Corps, not the Overseas Development Council, or the Legal Aid Society. Its members may be active in any or all of these bodies, but they are not these bodies and institutionally they cannot do their work. No wonder that hopes were frustrated when myth was allowed to transcend the reality of what higher education is and what it should be doing.

Not only the supporters in government and the private sector but also students expected something far beyond higher education and, of course, received less. A Harvard professor has stated it well:

> The dissolution of family and community life and the decline of secondary education have produced a generation of college students, many of whom no longer seek at the university learning and social pleasures, but also and above all affection, attention, moral guidance, and an opportunity to become personally involved in adult affairs. The universities are not equipped to provide these things.[1]

We have come out of the crisis, I believe, more disposed to provide for our students affection, attention, moral guidance, and an opportunity to become personally involved in adult affairs. Over time, the vote for 18-year-olds looms more important than military service. We have been listening harder to our students, which means we have been paying attention to them. We have learned that it is difficult to educate those we do not really love, and I trust I have already said enough about the moral dimension of higher education.

Agenda for tomorrow

Perhaps during that period of rapid growth, the institutions—the academic community—grew beyond its potential to be personal and human. High on the list of our agenda now must be how to correct this failing. The mea culpas should be

[1] Richard Pipes, in *New York Times*, 25 April 1969, p. 28.

many. The faculty, the heart of the whole endeavor, were often seduced by the possibility of being rewarded more and more for teaching less and less. Tenure too often became a safe opportunity for somnolence rather than a call to be different, to dare, and to excel. Trustees and presidents were too often too busy with the wrong things. Students were generally on target, but not always on the right one, especially when autocriticism was required. We were all less than we could and should have been. We were all caught up in unusual historical currents in a very troubled, unjust, and unpeaceful world, yes, but we still must answer for ourselves and our personal responsibility to remake our own world of higher education in a better image.

I began by expressing the hope that the worst may be over. Ours is a resilient enterprise—its very growth is testimony—and in the days to come, we may well be better off for the many tragedies we have experienced during the past five years. Clark Kerr recently said that American higher education has entered its second climacteric in more than a third of a millennium of its existence. That may be fearsome, but it is also exciting. According to Kerr, the last climacteric lasted 50 years, roughly from 1820 to 1870. Those 50 years were difficult; they saw many changes, but they were the prelude to the century of extraordinary growth that we have just experienced. May our second climacteric also be the prelude to better days ahead.

It would be consonant with the rapidity of change in our times, as compared to the last century, that this climacteric might be compressed from 50 into 5 years. Apart from hope, at least we must believe that we are, in large measure, the masters of our own destiny. If we have unwittingly disestablished our credibility, we can also consciously reestablish it. If we have tarnished our integrity of purpose, we can learn from our frustrated and impossible hopes, and move to refurbish our central purpose. If we grew slack in moral leadership, spoiled by affluence and prosperity, we will surely have some lean years ahead in which to rededicate ourselves to what is right and just. We cannot undo the past five years, but we can learn from them.

There is little profit in licking our wounds or feeling sorry for ourselves. We still represent the best hope for America's future, provided we learn from our own mistakes and reestablish in the days ahead what has so often testified to the nobility of our endeavors in times past. All is not lost. We are simply beginning again, as man always must, in a world filled with ambiguities, the greatest of which is man himself. □