

(Address given by the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President, University of Notre Dame, at the General Faculty Meeting, Notre Dame, Indiana, October 9, 1978)

THE PAST AND PRESENT OF AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

You have all heard the French saying that is a tribute to the ancient Greek cyclical theory of history: "Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose," -- the more things change, the more they are the same. I am not sure that this is so, if one views the history of higher education in America which begins with Harvard College in 1636. There certainly has been a great deal of change, but I am not sure that we are back where we started, in fact, I am sure we are not, unless one considers as very important a vestigial yearning today for structure, tradition, and values as central to the educational process.

American higher education began in order to educate gentlemen professionals -- first ministers of religion, but soon enough lawyers and doctors and teachers as well. In this it was not unlike the early Medieval universities where theology, law, medicine, and professing were central.

In the earliest of American colleges, classical languages, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, and classical literature and history including, of course, the Bible, were most important. This continued to be true for over two hundred years.

The first great departure came during the Civil War, <sup>in 1863,</sup> when Lincoln signed the Morrill Act inaugurating the land-grant universities in each of the states. The resulting agricultural and mechanical arts colleges were a far cry from the Ivy League classical ideal, but were, in fact, just what the growing nation needed as it moved into the great agricultural lands of the Midwest and West and into the industrial revolution as well. This development also represented a shift from private to public education, a first chapter in a transition from a totally private to a majority public system which ultimately came to pass after World War II, at which time we were about half public and half private. The land-grant act also represents the beginning of a populist trend in higher education in America, embryonic, but a beginning that would come to full fruition in the next century. The land-grant movement is perhaps the most significant <sup>^</sup>innovation since universities began in Medieval times. It was at the heart of American development.

There was another almost parallel development that greatly influenced the course of American higher education. For the first two and a half centuries of its history, teaching was a central, practically unique, concern, as was true in the Oxford-Cambridge prototypes which were our models. Then came the new German university emphasis on research and graduate studies which entered the American scene <sup>a century ago</sup> with the founding of specifically research and graduate universities, such as Johns Hopkins. A symbiosis soon enough took place.

The other great existing universities began to emphasize research and graduate studies while the newly-founded research universities also began accepting undergraduates.

In time, particularly since World War II, all of these influences merged as might be expected. Many of our older universities, once classical colleges, and many of our land-grant universities, once called cow colleges, became indistinguishable in their aims as great teaching and research institutions. There were peripheral differences, of course. The Harvards, Yales, Princetons, Chicagos, Stanfords were still private institutions with smaller and, therefore, more highly selective student bodies, but they are challenged in almost every university aspect by the Michigans, Wisconsin, and Berkeleys. Among the more than 3,000 institutions of higher education here, there are, at least in my judgment, about a hundred great universities in America today and they would generally be half private and half public -- although three quarters of all the students in higher education would be in public institutions which are less numerous, but generally larger than private institutions of higher learning. The greatest growth in higher education since World War II has been in community colleges, public institutions catering to masses of urban students who can live at home while attending these nearby colleges.

Following the war, there was a third emphasis or purpose introduced into universities in America, namely service to the

local community, the state, the nation, and the world. If it were possible, <sup>at that time,</sup> they would have included service to the solar system and the universe. After all, we are universities and this was a period of unmatched optimism and growth. The service involved just about everything that faculty and students could do, and some things as well that they could not do. It was all very well intentioned, and it did seem to re-emphasize the importance of the university to the society at large that supports it -- but in my present judgment, service loomed too large and promised much that it could not deliver. Service functions distracted many faculty and some students from research and teaching and learning which are certainly more central to the role of the university.

When the student revolution came in the sixties, we who were about to reform and recreate the world found that we often could not control our own central campuses and those who were violently disrupting them. From being enormously outward looking, we suddenly reversed our attentions and became inward looking, reassessing what we were doing and becoming a good deal less service oriented and less outwardly directed in the process. We are still involved in service to society, but each new project is much more closely scrutinized and more realistically appraised in view of its contribution or non-contribution to the central purposes of the university -- to teach, to learn, to research, to educate.

I have indulged in this rather kaleidoscopic and broad brush review of the course of higher learning in America because

so many of our guests tonight are from abroad, and the comment I now make about the present and future of American higher education might be seen better in the perspective of what has been, in the historical context. We live in a day when where we have been does not seem quite as important as where we are and where we are going. Happily, this ahistorical or anti-historical attitude is beginning to change. Note the popularity of Alex Haley's book, Roots. In my judgment, we cannot understand why or where we are without looking at where we came from and why. As to the future, we either understand the lessons of the past and learn from them or we do indeed repeat, as Santayana warned, all our past mistakes which were numerous by anybody's count.

Where are we going in higher education in America today? May I suggest several themes that I confess to be my personal opinion and not necessarily agreed to by my American colleagues.

Christian theologians generally think in trilogies and, since I began my university life as a Christian theologian, I trust you will forgive me if I discuss three modern trends or central concerns in American higher education. My three themes, questions, concerns, or problems, if you wish, are these:

1. Whom should we be teaching in higher education? Many students or few, elitist or populist choices, majorities or minorities? In a word, this is a problem of access. Related directly to this problem is the effect our decision will have on the work of higher education, basically the problem of trying to achieve quality and equality at the same time.

2. What should we teach? This is a problem of curriculum, of substance, of degrees granted, and basic cores of education.

3. How should ~~the~~<sup>we</sup> manage the whole endeavor? This is a problem of governance which is not unrelated to financing, autonomy, and academic freedom. These are perennial university problems.

I

[Now to the first problem, or problematic as the theologians say. I've never understood the difference, which probably dates me.]

4/ The first problem is one of quality and equality. Since the problem only involves one letter of the alphabet, I am reminded of the violent quarrels between fourth century theologians regarding two key Greek words, similarly different by only one letter -- homoousios and homoiousios. I think the theologians' problem was more fundamental than ours, theological problems are generally more fundamental than social problems, but our problem is really at the heart of American society, as well as <sup>central to</sup> American educational policy today.

America was born with the wonderful statement of the Declaration of Independence, "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal." That was indeed, in 1776, a philosophical mouthful. It took us the better part of two centuries to make it come true for most Americans, women as well as men, black as well as white, young as well as old, poor as well as rich. We are still making history, but I do believe that the fundamental struggle for equality has been largely won. I say largely because there is still a distance to go. Even saying largely cannot deny that.

Now I would like to put the case of quality versus equality in its most recent lineaments in the modern history of higher education. Because America was grateful to those who risked their lives for world freedom in World War II, higher education was opened and subsidized, as never before, for millions of returning veterans. We called this legislation the G.I. Bill. The result was perhaps the best investment that our government ever made. By 1950, there were 3,000,000 in colleges and universities. Once the floodgates were opened and aspirations raised, the movement was only in one direction -- upward. As a young instructor, teaching these veterans and being their Chaplain in the years following 1945, I can personally attest that they brought a new spirit, a new enthusiasm for upward mobility, to higher education. They were great -- and their achievement spelled equality -- or access -- as never before. A whole new day had dawned, and the light would be three times brighter in the next twenty years -- almost four times, if you extrapolate it to our day: three to eleven million students in American higher education.

Then in 1957, something else happened. It was called Sputnik. All of a sudden, this vaunted higher education in America seemed second rate. This was, in fact, a bad conclusion from dramatic, though inconclusive, evidence, but there it was. Immediately, the emphasis was <sup>said</sup> on for quality. We had to be the best. At the time, I was a member of a key governmental body, the National Science Board. When I joined the Board in 1954, we had a budget of \$6

million for basic research, mainly in universities. When I finished my twelve year term in 1966, the NSF budget had grown to \$600 million. That says something about the thrust for quality in higher education -- the main target of our NSF funds. This period might be called the decade of quality because this was our main concern.

Then in the middle sixties, we had a concurrent revolution for equality. I was part of that, too, and no less enthusiastically, as a member and later Chairman, of the United States Commission on Civil Rights. We broke all the barriers, educational and otherwise, for blacks and other minorities in the mid-sixties. Today, we conveniently forget that prior to the middle sixties, we had an all-pervasive system of apartheid in all our thirteen Southern states, almost as bad as South Africa's today. All this apartheid was eliminated, as a system, almost overnight, by the Federal Civil Rights Laws of 1964, 1965, and 1967.

The new equality for minorities, particularly blacks, was dramatically evident in education. The <sup>de jure</sup> segregated elementary and secondary school system <sup>in the South</sup> was largely eliminated within a five year period. All the great universities in the land, North and South, so enlarged their black enrollments through <sup>affirmative action and</sup> new scholarship programs that within a decade the proportion of black high school graduates <sup>enrolling in</sup> attending colleges and universities was equal to that of whites. Blacks who numbered only about 200 in what were predominantly white medical schools North and South, ten years ago, now have

over 3,000 enrolled. As the Bakke case testifies, there is a new concern today, the very opposite of that a decade ago, namely reverse discrimination in favor of minorities. Parenthetically, my personal opinion on this point is that we arrived at the past condition of unjust disequilibrium between the numbers of black and white university graduates and professional persons because of an age-old practice of unjust discrimination against blacks and other minorities. It will take a temporary reverse discrimination, or affirmative action, to balance the scales of justice, meeting the promise of our Constitution regarding the equality of all Americans. Constitutional law, <sup>as invoked in the Bakke case,</sup> should not be used to thwart the most basic concern of the Constitution: equal justice for all.

This then is, in brief compass, the recent history of ~~our~~ striving for quality and equality in American higher education. What then is the problem? Basically, the problem is that we need in American higher education both quality and equality. That was the title of the first report of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education published in 1968. However, I believe that given the enormous influence of federally financed programs on higher education, we have gone from a massive financing of quality following Sputnik, to a much more massive financing of equality or access to higher education following the civil rights revolution of the middle sixties. It was calculated last year that the federal government was then spending six times more for equality in higher education than for quality. The latest massive addition, <sup>of \$1.5 billion</sup> to the higher educational budget announced by President Carter last February was totally in the area of equality, not quality.

A famous American comedian who died last year, Groucho Marx, used to jest: "Any club that will allow me to be a member isn't worth joining." Like all humor, there is a large grain of truth in this. Unless the quality of American higher education is kept on a high level and constantly improved -- a very costly project -- millions more will have access to that which is not all that much worth having if its value has become debased, its promise emptied.

Eric Ashby has put the case best in a 1970 essay:

"In America the thin stream of intellectual excellence is kept clear by two intellectual devices: the highly selective university and the prestige of graduate school. No one, however dedicated to egalitarianism, is likely to advocate open admissions to the undergraduate college of Harvard or to graduate study in physics at Berkeley. But are these filters for excellence satisfactory? I venture to say no, they are not.

"There must be, within any system of education beyond high school, opportunities for the critical faculty to be sharpened to the point where it can challenge assumptions. This cannot be done except by close contact with men who really are intellectual masters. Not many students are fit for this discipline, but those who are must be able to find it, or the thin stream of intellectual excellence on which society depends for innovation, for wise judgment in unforeseen crises, for management of highly complex systems, will dry up." (Any Person, Any Study, p. 31)

I must insist again that all of this is costly, but without such quality education, at least in a significant number of

institutions, the whole endeavor lapses into meaningless mediocrity. Later in the same essay, Ashby makes the same point with unusual clarity and forceful eloquence:

"All civilized countries depend upon a thin clear stream of excellence to provide new ideas, new techniques, and the statesman-like treatment of complex social and political problems. Without the renewal of this excellence, a nation can drop to mediocrity in a generation. The renewal of excellence is expensive: the highly gifted student needs informal instruction, intimate contact with other first-class minds, opportunities to learn the discipline of dissent from men who have themselves changed patterns of thought; in a word (it is one which has become a five-letter word of reproach) this sort of student needs to be treated as elite. De Tocqueville long ago predicted that this would be anathema in an egalitarian society. He was right: by a curious twist of reasoning, persons who enthusiastically agree to supernormal educational expenditure on the intellectually under-privileged, oppose supernormal expenditure on the intellectually overprivileged, who need it just as much. It is commonly assumed that America has to choose between one or other of two patterns of higher education: mass or elite. I would deny this assumption. It is America's prime educational challenge to devise a coexistence of both patterns. There is already sufficient evidence to demonstrate that this could be done without dissolving and redesigning the whole system."

However optimistic one is about the possibilities of pursuing at the same time both quality and equality in higher education, I must say that we must achieve both simultaneously if the great enterprise that is America is to continue and to prosper and to realize its deepest human dreams. We educators must remove the stigma from the word "elite." When I am sick, I want an elite doctor, when on an airplane, an elite pilot, when in difficulty with the law, an elite lawyer. Who does not want elite doctors, elite lawyers, elite teachers, elite artists, elite scientists, elite engineers, elite architects? And where will they come from if not from elite education, open to the highest talent of every nation and race. There is a difference between equality and egalitarianism and there is a bottomless gulf between quality and mediocrity. I would hope that in the future, American higher education can always reflect <sup>both</sup> quality and equality rather than settle for being egalitarian and mediocre.

## II

The second central problem facing us in American higher education today regards not who is taught and how they are taught, but rather what is taught. This problem basically concerns what it is to be educated, what common core of knowledge is essential to anyone claiming to be human and civilized. Put differently, is there any set of concepts, ideas, ideals, aspirations, hopes, and even dreams that can form a matrix within which human beings anywhere and everywhere can hold a meaningful discussion and discourse upon essential human concerns?

As indicated earlier in the brief historical sketch with which I began this essay, there was a day several centuries ago, in a pre-scientific, pre-industrial, colonial day when we thought we knew the common theme which gave a unity to education and a curriculum common to all universities. It is difficult to imagine, much less portray, what has happened to American higher education from the day 342 years ago, when the first Harvard students, all nine of them, took about ten courses in classical languages, literature, and the Bible, all taught by the President. Today about 11,000,000 students in America take over 2,000,000 classes in about 3,000 institutions, taught by a half million faculty members. In contrast to that first Harvard degree, today there are over 1,500 separate degrees granted. Is any unity of language, knowledge, or discourse possible amid such modern diversity?

In some ways it is easier to understand and state the forces contrary to any curricular unity. A recent Carnegie publication puts the problem of formulating a meaningful curriculum for higher education:

"There are eternal points of tension: scholarship versus training, attention more to the past or to the present or to the future; integration versus fragmentation; socialization into the culture versus alienation from the culture; student choices versus institutional requirements; breadth versus depth; skills versus understanding versus personal interests; theory versus practice;

ethical commitment versus ethical neutrality ....." (Missions of the College Curriculum, Carnegie Council, Jossey-Bass, 1977, pp. 1-2)

The first great departure from the unified curriculum of the first two centuries of American higher education came after our Civil War, with the advent of the land-grant colleges and the vast expansion of knowledge that led to specialization, different functional colleges and professional schools, especially departments catering to special careers and the specialized knowledge and research they required.

The second broad departure from an earlier unified curriculum came and is coming during the sixties and current seventies. As students become scarcer, and higher education approaches a steady state condition, there is more of a consumer or market oriented curriculum which seeks to attract unusual students, part-time and adult.

If one could oversimplify these three stages, the earlier curricular approach was cultural, the heritage of Western civilization, the second was oriented towards knowledge for use or employment or industrial or rural development (the original land-grant ideal). The developing curriculum of today, while influenced by these earlier stages, is more geared to what seems relevant, allowing students to pick and choose among a wide range of so-called "practical" or "artistic" courses, many of which would formerly have been shunned like the plague in most institutions of higher education. Today such courses are the bread and butter attractions of many community colleges. In this recent endeavor, America is largely on its own, no longer emulating British or German university models.

In the face of these curricular developments, it is interesting to see how the undergraduates now choose their field of studies.

58% are in professional studies, including the widest range of occupational choices.

15% are majoring in the physical and natural sciences, especially biology

8% in the social sciences

6% in the arts

5% in the humanities and 8% undistributed.

Looked at horizontally, despite these vertical choices of students, the various curricula generally include an almost equal remnant of the historical stages: one-third general or liberal courses, one-third specialized or major courses, and, finally, a third part of elective courses, chosen at will and often at random. Restated somewhat cynically, one might say that students today are studying what the educators think they need to be minimally cultured, what the professionals think students need to be minimally competent to perform professionally, and, lastly, what the students think they need and want to study, for a wide variety of motives.

One can say at least that all of this development leaves American higher education today enormously diverse, and depending on the excellence of the faculty and students and institutional requirements, widely varying in quality.

My personal response to the current situation is that especially we in select private and public research and teaching universities must ask ourselves what we are really trying to do through education and how realistically we are achieving our mission and goals through the present curriculum which has evolved in response to myriad internal and external pressures.

I suggest that we give major attention to the humanistic or liberal aspects of the total course of studies, for it is only here that a student learns to situate himself or herself personally in a rapidly changing world, as a man or woman, as a religious or non-religious person, as a member of a given race, nationality, culture, or tradition. It is mainly through liberal education that one learns how to think clearly, logically, beautifully, how to express oneself, how to learn continually in a wide variety of ways, how to evaluate ideas and ideals, how to appreciate where humankind has been and is going. Whatever else we do to educate our students, all these liberating qualities, skills, and concepts are essential to what kind of persons they are becoming, no matter what they are preparing to do in life. It is also, I believe, in this humanistic area that any curriculum will achieve a measure of unity and coherence. American higher education is ripe for an intellectual attempt at synthesis following a fairly long period of disintegrating and fragmenting specialization in all of the various disciplines. We should not expect our students to effect an integration of the knowledge we give them if we ourselves cannot

plan or explain or understand that integration, or unity, or synthesis. If the curriculum explains best where we are and what we are doing as educators, then it deserves much more attention from presidents, deans, and faculties than it is receiving today.

### III

The third and final concern or problem I would like to discuss briefly is university governance, how we manage the whole endeavor of American higher education.

Governance is in many ways a reflection of the educational history and ideals of this country. Since all of higher education was private and independent during the first few centuries, it is understandable that public education today is largely governed in the same tradition of the private sector which borrowed from the British. We all have Trustees, as the highest governing body, a group generally chosen from the public at large. Then there is an Academic Senate or Council, an internal body largely made up of faculty and administrators who control the internal academic decisions of the university, subject to Trustee approval. Below the academic Senate, there are a wide variety of collegiate, departmental, and student councils and committees, plus a large administrative body of president and chancellor at times, provost, vice presidents, and deans.

We, in America, are more highly and more professionally organized than most European universities. I remember visiting

Sir Maurice Bowra when he was Vice Chancellor, Chief Executive Officer, at Oxford University. At ten in the morning, he was sitting at an absolutely clean desk, not a paper, not a telephone, not a secretary, reading a Greek book. "How does this place get run?" I asked, with some envy. "By tradition," he replied.

With all this organization which characterizes the governance of American higher education, how can there be a problem and a concern? May I say that governance of universities, everywhere in the world, will always have a problem in maintaining those two university characteristics which are ever difficult to uphold: autonomy and academic freedom.

The university is the only institution in modern society that is largely supported by society and yet claims a unique autonomy to criticize the very society that once gave it birth and now gives it financial support. There will always be <sup>governments</sup> ~~societies~~ and other university sponsors, such as churches and corporations, who will gag on this demand of autonomy. Yet, I would have to say quite proudly that in America, those who govern universities have managed in a superlative way to maintain the university's autonomy against all external and internal threats to the essential independence of the university community.

As the universities, even the private ones, depend more and more upon the federal and state governments for support, there will, I think, be increasing occasions for us to resist the bureaucratic

urge to interfere with the universities essential independence, *the move* to insist that we do this or that or forfeit the beneficence of the state. We must be morally responsible in our exercise of autonomy, but within this moral parameter, we must be ever ready to say: take your support; we would rather have our freedom. This is always easier for private universities who have other means of support, and this is one of the best reasons to maintain a balance of distinguished private as well as public universities in this land. In a very real way, our inherent independence and autonomy as private universities guarantees the same for the public universities.

Those who govern must also preserve the academic freedom of the university. The most obvious modern threat to this academic freedom is the modern move to politicize the university. This threat grew out of the student rebellion of the late sixties and early seventies. Fortunately, most American universities did not allow themselves to be politicized by the more radical elements of the faculty and students. Unfortunately, some European universities did over-react and we are now paying the price for the reorganization that grew out of the demand for student participation in governance.

I recently learned of a very distinguished European university that will not be distinguished much longer because now it is largely governed by radical students and non-academic staff who form the majority of most university councils. Now faculty are appointed

and granted tenure not for their academic excellence, but for their ideological orthodoxy, according to the students radical views. Thus is the university politicized, and in a politicized university, academic freedom becomes a travesty. In this once great university, standards have been lowered, the century-old university values regarding academic excellence have been bastardized, and all of the best faculty are leaving for freer lands. This is the tragedy that strikes when academic freedom dies.

Recently a law faculty member petitioned our governing Board of Trustees to declare that the University <sup>takes a</sup> stands against abortion. He insisted that if we could take a position on the Bakke case, we could do so on abortion, too.

I opposed him on the grounds that Bakke is part of the University's concern about equal access to university professional schools, whereas abortion is not related to our area of higher educational concerns. To become involved and to take a university position on every modern moral concern would ultimately destroy our freedom to do objectively and freely that which we do best. Again Lord Ashby has a word of wisdom:

"The universities will have to reach a consensus about the limits of their responsibilities. A hospital is not expected to make corporate statements about political or social issues unless they impinge on the health service. Similarly a university's authority is preserved only if it remains corporately silent

except on issues which impinge on education. Some of the dissent in universities today is due to a misinterpretation of this restraint. Because a hospital, a college, a museum, a library, do not corporately condemn war, it is not to be assumed that they corporately condone war. It is not commonly understood that institutional silence is necessary in order to safeguard freedom of speech among members of the institution. Instead, this silence in the academic community is taken, especially by the young, as evidence that intellectual detachment and the life of reason are inconsistent with social concern and emotional commitment. If universities and colleges are to survive as we know them, this illusion must be dispelled."

I must now conclude, and wish to do so by saying that as one who has spent the totality of his adult life, since age seventeen, in a university, I am happy to testify that there is no place where I would, upon serious reflection, rather live. A university is a wonderful home if one wishes to be intellectually alive, free, and ever open to further growth in mind and spirit. A university is, in the words of the <sup>former</sup> poet Laureate Masfield of England, "a splendid place." I take it that the most noble task that faces all of us who have been privileged to be university people for most of our lives is to give our very best to see that our universities, wherever in this world we live and work and educate, continue to be "splendid places."