

(Address given by the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President, University of Notre Dame, on the occasion of receiving the College Board Medal for Distinguished Service to Education, New Orleans, Louisiana, October 29, 1979)

About twelve years ago, the Carnegie Commission on the Future of Higher Education produced its first, and one of its slimmest reports. The title was "Quality and Equality." Two words with one letter difference, yet they encapsulate what was then, and in my judgment, still is today the central tension, the most difficult and most important challenge facing American higher education.

The Carnegie Commission over the six years of its life produced a veritable bookshelf of reports, about a hundred volumes. Never before, and probably never again, will American higher education receive such a close and continuing scrutiny. We were about twenty-four Commissioners. We met for several days each month in different localities. We visited innumerable campuses and met with hundreds of educators.

When all was said and done, and written, there still remained that pivotal dilemma: quality and equality. I have thought and written much about it since -- so have most of my colleagues. It is probably fair to say that we have, in different times and places, made progress towards greater quality, or towards greater equality, but I am not certain today that we have most often reached both goals together. Putting it differently, we have often achieved the one goal, either quality or equality, at the expense of the other.

In the long run, this will not do. Both goals are essential to the American enterprise of higher education. The achievement of either goal without the other would be a hollow victory, both unworthy of American higher education and untrue to the best political and educational ideals of America.

Not everyone would agree with this. There are those who condemn the never-ending search for quality as elitism, ^{an enemy of democracy,} which in some people's mind, means that all must be equal, or every person should simply be proclaimed equal, even though some perform at a higher level than others. Elitism is equated with snobbery, with older pre-democratic societies, with dividing society into nobles and peasants.

May I say a word in defense of elitism, even in a democracy. I believe in and cherish elite performance. The alternative is to reduce everything to grey mediocrity. When I fly in an airplane, I want an elite pilot up front at the controls. When I visit a dentist, I patronize one I judge elite by his performance, not one with little knowledge and two left hands exploring my root canals. When we turn the University's endowment over to investment firms, the Trustees look long and far to find the best in the land. And I make no excuse for the constant, undying and difficult effort to make the agonizing decisions that will bring to the University the best faculty, the best students, the best administrators, the best facilities, and the best and most demanding and most liberal curriculum, too. If this is elitism, I am guilty.

It is curious that many of those who argue against the elitism manifest in all of these painful academic decisions, suddenly become super-elitist in choosing their restaurants, their wines, even their quarterbacks and tackles.

This nation was not founded by a group of mediocrities. By any standard of the times, Jefferson, Washington, Hamilton, Adams, Monroe, Franklin and company were a very special elite. Because of that, they gave us a very special kind of country, with a special vision of equality. In every age, forward progress is made by an educated elite, whether in politics, religion, business, education, or even sports. The Olympics are not for the mediocre, nor is opera, ballet, or the arts, or the sciences at their best. Talent is both race and color blind. We must cherish and nurture it wherever it is found.

If that particular human endeavor that proposes to develop the whole person, in mind and heart and spirit, in vision and ideal, ^{educational endeavor} if this is not dedicated first and foremost to quality, then it will be unworthy, even more, it will be a monumental fraud, both to those who support it and to the students who are to grow mainly through quality education.

Regarding the second goal, equality, there are also those who disagree. For the longest part of our national history, they held sway. There was, until recently, no equality of opportunity in higher education for most minorities.

All that was changed -- at least legally -- with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. One must admit that enormous change has occurred in the fifteen years since then. Higher education has been entirely desegregated, North and South, since 1964, although because of past educational deprivation and lack of good elementary and secondary education for minorities, coupled with lack of past access to higher education, we have a continuing problem with enlarging the pool of qualified minorities for higher education, for faculty positions, and, especially, for entry to professional schools -- this is changing, but all too slowly.

All this says to me is that we must try harder to enlarge the minority presence in higher education today, Bakke notwithstanding. When people ask me why I press so hard on Affirmative Action when equality of opportunity is now secured, I say, opportunity against a background of dismal preparation over generations is not equal opportunity at all. If you sprain your ankle, both ankles are not equal. You favor the one until both are equally strong. Then you can talk about treating them equally.

Even so, Affirmative Action^{as} at its worst ~~is~~^{is} admitting either faculty or students who are not qualified, instituting a double standard. If extra attention is needed to make opportunity equal, then we must provide^{whatever needed} is to balance the scales. The scales must eventually be balanced, but it would be the worst kind of injustice to use different standards, different weights in the balance. This helps neither the individual involved nor the cause we espouse.

Groucho Marks once said in jest that any club that would admit him was not worth joining. It is the worst kind of travesty today to freely admit minorities to programs that defraud the participants with a degree that is worthless, without quality. It is also the best way to prolong the problem of achieving quality and equality at the same time.

America and American higher education need both quality and equality. It is one of the highest words of praise to this organization, the College Board, to say that it has ever worked to achieve both quality and equality together. Despite inevitable criticism, may it continue to do so. There is no easy answer, but until we achieve both quality and equality, our twin goal, American higher education will fall short of its highest purposes.