

# Creating the New American College

How can American higher education successfully contribute to national renewal? Is it possible for the work of the academy to relate more effectively to our most pressing social, economic, and civic problems? These questions, while always appropriate, seem especially relevant today because, for the first time in years, our colleges and universities are not collectively caught up in some urgent national endeavor.

Higher education and the larger purposes of American society have been—from the very first—inextricably intertwined. In the Colonial college, teaching was a central, even sacred, function; the goal was to train the clergy and educate civic leaders. ". . . If we norish not Larning," minister John Eliot wrote in 1636, "both church & commonwealth will sinke."

Following the American Revolution, the purpose of higher learning's goals slowly began to shift from the shaping of young lives to the building of a nation. The founding of institutions such as Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in 1824 was an acknowledgment that America needed railroad builders, bridge builders, builders of all kinds, according to the historian Fred Rudolph.

In 1862, the move toward practicality emerged again when Congress passed the land-grant act, which linked higher learning to the nation's agricultural and industrial revolutions. When the social critic Lincoln Steffens visited the University of Wisconsin at Madison at the turn of the century, he said: "In Wisconsin, the university is as close to the intelligent farmer as his pig-pen and his tool-house." In 1896, Woodrow Wilson, who would become Princeton's president in 1902, declared, "It is not learning but the spirit of service that will give a college a place in the public annals of the nation." On the West Coast, David Starr Jordan, president of Stanford University, declared in 1903 that the entire university movement in this country was progressing toward "reality" and "practicality."

Frankly, I find it quite amazing that less than a century ago, the words reality, practicality, and service were used by the nation's most distinguished academic leaders to describe higher education's mission.

In my own lifetime, this vision of service has been reaffirmed time and time again. When the nation's economy collapsed, President Franklin D. Roosevelt recruited distinguished scholars to serve as his academic brain trust. During World War II, great universities joined government to create the world's most powerful research engine. When hostilities ceased, Yannevar Bush, director of the federal Office of Scientific Research and Development, insisted that universities, having helped "win the war," could also win the peace. The founding of the National Science Foundation in 1950 sparked a government-university partnership that still persists. Another historic partnership was formed when the GI Bill brought eight million veterans to campus, spurring economic renewal and a revolution of rising expectations.

After the Soviet Union launched Sputnik into space, colleges and universities were called upon once again—this time to help rejuvenate the nation's schools. The very title of the National Defense Education Act of 1958 clearly linked higher learning to the security of our country. Federal fellowships brought thousands of teachers back to campus to upgrade their skills and enrich instruction.

Then, in the early 1960's, President John F. Kennedy's Peace Corps inspired college students to help create a better world. And I vividly recall how the civil-rights movement of that decade vigorously challenged colleges and universities to join a national crusade to promote human justice. The story of America and higher learning have been inseparably interlocked.

But what about today? I'm concerned that in recent years, higher education's historic commitment to serv-

ice seems to have diminished. I'm troubled that many now view the campus as a place where professors get tenured and students get credentialled; the overall efforts of the academy are not considered to be at the vital center of the nation's work. And what I find most disturbing is the growing feeling in this country that higher education is a *private* benefit, not a public good.

Liberal learning and scholarly investigations are indeed service to the nation. Yet the mission statement of almost every college and university in the country includes not just teaching and research, but *service*, too—a commitment that was never more needed than it is today.

Consider the condition of our children. Nearly one out of every four youngsters under the age of six is poor. Thousands of babies are born each year damaged by alcohol or drug abuse. Many children live in sub-

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standard housing, some are homeless, and only about one-third of the youngsters eligible for Head Start are being served. Given such conditions, can colleges and universities honestly conclude that the crises confronting America's children are someone else's problem?

Recently, I visited a residence hall at Texas Woman's University that has been converted into apartments for single mothers and their children. While the mothers work and attend class, the youngsters are in a day-care center run by college students. The university's nursing school runs a clinic for mothers and babies at a nearby housing project. Such programs reveal, in very practical ways, how academic talent can touch the lives of families.

Consider also the crisis in our schools. Some students are successful, but far too many are educationally deficient, often dropping out. What we're facing in education is not just academic failure, but also drugs, violence, and alienation—problems that cannot be solved by simply adding more requirements for graduation. Do colleges really believe they can ignore the social pathologies that surround schools and erode the educational foundations of our nation?

AND WHAT ABOUT OUR CITIES? Urban America is where the nation's fabric is now experiencing its most serious strain. Violence, unemployment, poverty, poor housing, and pollution often occur at the very doorsteps of some of our most distinguished colleges and universities. How can the nation's campuses stay disengaged? Ira Harkavy, director of the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Community Partnerships, warns that "universities cannot afford to remain shores of affluence, self-importance, and horticultural beauty at the edge of island seas of squalor, violence, and despair."

The good news is that universities in cities such as Detroit, Buffalo, New York City, and Philadelphia, to name a few, are linking campus talent to local problems. Recently, a consortium of 10 colleges and universities in Baltimore launched the Shriver Center, a bold new initiative that will focus a rich array of academic resources on the city.

Such efforts surely should be applauded. At the same time, we should candidly acknowledge that model urban programs such as these all too frequently operate with little support and even less academic status. Let's

also acknowledge that faculty members who spend too much time engaged in such projects often jeopardize their careers.

Higher education has more intellectual talent than any other institution in our culture. Today's colleges and universities surely must respond to the challenges that confront our children, our schools, and our cities, just as the land-grant colleges responded to the needs of agriculture and industry a century ago.

How, then, do we proceed? First, let's re-evaluate the priorities of the professoriate and give to scholarship a broader, more efficacious meaning. In a recent Carnegie report entitled "Scholarship Reconsidered," we proposed a new paradigm of scholarship, one that not only promotes the scholarship of *discovering* knowledge, but also celebrates the scholarship of *integrating* knowledge, of *communicating* knowledge, and of *applying* knowledge through professional service.

SERVICE, in this context, means far more than simply doing good, although that's important. Rather, it means that professors apply knowledge to real-life problems, use that experience to revise their theories, and become, in the words of professor Donald Schön at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, "reflective practitioners." Today, it is widely acknowledged that academic work in such fields as medicine, law, architecture, teacher preparation, and business can be strengthened as both students and professors move from theory to practice and from practice back to theory.

Second, if the academy is to be more responsive to community concerns, institutions themselves must become less imitative and more creative. Of course we need great centers of research. We need campuses that give priority to teaching. But we also need institutions that define professional service as a central mission. The goal of such colleges would be "to bring knowledge into intimate relationships with the small, daily problems of real people and real neighborhoods," as Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, professor of history, and education at Teachers College, Columbia University, has eloquently put it.

What I'm describing might be called the "New American College," an institution that celebrates teaching and selectively supports research, while also taking special pride in its capacity to connect thought to action, theory to practice. This New American College would organize cross-disciplinary institutes around pressing social issues. Undergraduates at the college would participate in field projects, relating ideas to real life. Classrooms and laboratories would be extended to include health clinics, youth centers, schools, and government offices. Faculty members would build partnerships with practitioners who would, in turn, come to campus as lecturers and student advisers.

The New American College, as a connected institution, would be committed to improving, in a very intentional way, the human condition. As clusters of such colleges formed, a new model of excellence in higher education would emerge, one that would enrich the campus, renew communities, and give new dignity and status to the scholarship of service.

More than a half century ago, the historian Oscar Handlin put the challenge this way: "Our troubled planet can no longer afford the luxury of pursuits confined to an ivory tower. Scholarship has to prove its worth, not on its own terms, but by service to the nation and the world." Responding to *this* challenge is what the New American College will be about.

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