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. For the first time in years, our colleges and universities are not collectively taught 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, central goal; the goal was to train the clergy and educate civic leaders. . . . If we nourish not Learning, minister John Eliot wrote in 1636, "both church and commonwealth will sink."

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 created 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 joined government to research, 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 substandard 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. When we are facing in education is not just academic failure, but also drugs, violence, and alienation—problems that cannot be solved by simply adding more resources 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 detached? In 1968, the National Defense Education Act of 1958 clearly linked higher learning to the security of our country. Federal fellowships brought millions of students back to campus to upgrade their skills and enrich instruction. By the 1970's, the very fabric of the American community is now in danger. 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 service seems to have diminished. I'm troubled that many now view the campus as a place where professors get tenure and students get credentialed; the overall effect of the academy is not considered to be a 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.

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In the context, means far more than simply doing good, although that's important. Rather, it means that professors apply knowledge to real problems, use that experience to revise their theories, and build on 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, and teacher preparation, and business can be strengthened as both students and professors move from theory to practice and from practice back to theory.

Major change 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 "to bring knowledge into intimate relationships with the small, daily problems of real people and real neighborhoods," as Ellen Condliffe Lagomann, 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 effectively supports research, while also taking special pride in its capacity to connect thought to action, theory to practice. This New American College would graduate 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 guest 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 in the chapter of 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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