

## THE NEW AMERICAN COLLEGE

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ast spring at Mt. Union College in Ohio, I delivered what I thought was a fairly successful commencement speech (though I have observed long ago that commencement addresses are the least remembered utterances on earth). I was followed by the class valedictorian who told a simple anecdote, and so far as I was concerned, her speech won the day!

The valedictorian said that during spring break she was babysitting her five-year-old niece. To fill the time she brought along a box of crayolas and a brand new coloring book. The five-year-old went slowly through each page, passing by dinosaurs, birds, dogs, cats, and trees, finally coming to the blank page in the back. She then began to color. At this point the little girl was asked, "Why did you pass up all the fascinating pictures and end up coloring the back page?" The young child replied, "well back here you can do anything you want."

The coloring book may, in fact, be an appropriate metaphor for American higher education. For the past forty years or more, higher learning in this country has increasingly been coloring inside the lines. In spite of all the talk about diversity, this great enterprise of American higher education, which *is* the envy of the world, has become, at the same time, hugely imitative. As I've observed the process throughout the years, decisions have been made, more on the basis of external pressures than imperatives from within. And all too frequently colleges shape their programs on the basis of prestige, not purpose.

Forty years ago I was dean at a small college in Southern California, right next to Pomona, which to us was, figuratively, the prestigious cathedral on the hill. While working out our general education program, we just turned to Pomona's catalog. When I asked where Pomona got it, they said, "Harvard." Immediately I began to understand what planning in higher learning was all about, and the inclination to color inside the lines.

I understand just how much colleges like to celebrate their distinctions. But frankly, the differences are not substantive but superficial. Locations

and size and traditions may vary but when it comes to academic policy it's all pretty much the same. Indeed, if the covers of college catalogs were concealed it would be very difficult to distinguish one institution programmatically from another. Recently I asked a distinguished higher education leader to name the colleges he considered especially distinctive – institutions that were coloring outside the lines. He named Empire State College in New York, Hampshire College, Berea College, St. Johns, and then he seemed to run out of nominations.

That exercise reminded me of the 1950's, the decade when I first entered higher education. There was at that time a group of so-called "experimental" colleges that took great pride in their uniqueness. The Antiochs and the Reeds, but also Bennington and Goddard and something called New College at Hofstra, were looked upon as being special, not because of their endowment or publication record but because of the distinctiveness of their programs. I also recall Monteith College and Wayne State and "the Beloit Plan." Almost all of these, without any disrespect intended, have folded or moved beyond their innovative peak.

There is, of course, no virtue in difference for its own sake. Educational practices that have proved successful throughout the years should be widely shared. Still, it is troubling that much of what we do in higher education goes unchallenged. Why are we so confident that being an educated person takes four years? Why isn't there more learning outside a classroom? I'm convinced the time has come for a new generation of creative colleges that color outside the lines – institutions that become what I've recently referred to as "The New American College." What's needed, I believe, are institutions that define distinctive missions based on a vision other than the two traditional symbols of excellence in higher education, the research university and liberal arts college. But for this to happen, I'm convinced that priorities of the professoriate must be courageously redefined. We must give to scholarship a broader, more efficacious meaning.

For over a century, the stated mission of American higher education, and particularly its universities, has been to provide research, teaching, and service. In most instances the three purposes have been listed with the implication of equal importance. The balance has never been a comfortable one. Yet, on the whole, a reasonable relationship was maintained even in the most prestigious universities throughout the first half of the current century.

Following World War II, America experienced a sea change in higher education. Thanks to the G.I. Bill, the country – almost overnight – moved from elite to mass higher education. Enrollments exploded and campuses were being built at the rate of one a week. The irony was that at the very moment the mission of higher education was being broadened, the reward system of the professoriate was being narrowed.

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Responding to the explosive growth, a veritable army of newly minted PhD's went to campuses from coast to coast, determined to recreate the academic climate they themselves had experienced in graduate school, and research, not teaching, became the primary criterion of success.

A core of baccalaureate colleges held firmly to the "collegiate tradition," with its strong connection to liberal learning. But in the academic culture overall, the reward system – in terms of salaries, mobility, and prestige – increasingly became skewed in favor of highly-specialized research and publication, a shift that took its toll on liberal learning and service, and forced many of the newly established "comprehensive colleges and universities" to be continuously confused about their mission.

In the early 1960s, I was at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and watched a former teacher education and home economics institution being folded into the University of California system, and faculty who were hired to fulfill one mission suddenly were held accountable for another. I then went to the State University of New York, where we struggled to maintain separate missions among 64 institutions during a time of "upward drift," when campuses were rapidly becoming more imitative than creative.

Simply stated, by the late twentieth century, the great land grant tradition of public service in American higher education had faded from the scene, and most campuses were caught in the conflict of two great traditions. On the one hand, there was the colonial college tradition with its emphasis on the student, on general education, and on loyalty to the campus. On the other hand, there was the German university tradition with its emphasis not on the student, but on the professoriate; not on general, but on specialized education; not on loyalty to the campus, but on loyalty to the guild. And almost all the consequential debates on campus – especially at comprehensive institutions – involve a struggle for the soul of the institution. Are we a colonial college, a European university, or a blend of both?

When out recruiting students, most higher education institutions are collegiate to the core, describing themselves in viewbooks and videocassettes as a place with lots of loving, tender care. But when students actually enroll, they frequently discover a campus sharply divided between the collegiate and university traditions – with liberal learning caught somewhere in the middle.

What are we to do about all of this? Is it possible to reorder priorities of the professoriate?

Recently, at The Carnegie Foundation, we prepared a special report entitled *Scholarship Reconsidered*. In this short monograph, which critically codified further the higher education themes we had been proposing for a decade, we defined a broader view of scholarship, one with four interlocking parts. This new paradigm acknowledges the full

range of faculty work – teaching, research, and service – and may provide a framework within which the New American College might be built.

*The Scholarship of Discovery.* First, every member of the academy should demonstrate his or her ability to do research, and we celebrate in our report what we call *the scholarship of discovery*, insisting that higher education must continue to be the home of disciplined investigation.

Fifty years ago, Vannevar Bush of MIT said that universities are “the wellspring of knowledge and understanding. As long as . . . scientists are free to pursue the truth wherever it may lead, there will continue to be a flow of new scientific knowledge.” This vision of the pursuit of truth is surely the essence of what higher education is all about, and we urge that the scholarship of discovery be vigorously reaffirmed.

*The Scholarship of Integration.* Beyond discovery, we propose, as a second priority, what we call the *scholarship of integration*. The tendency of the disciplines has been to isolate themselves from one another, with academic departments becoming political bases, not centers of intellectual quest. In such a climate, knowledge is fragmented and the integrative purposes of liberal learning are almost hopelessly obscured.

The good news is that the cognitive map is changing. Some of the most exciting work in the academy today is in what Michael Polanyi, of the University of Chicago, calls “overlapping [academic] neighborhoods,” the new hyphenated disciplines of psycho-linguistics, bioengineering, molecular biology, and the like. Clifford Geertz, of the Institute for Advanced Study, in his fascinating essay, *Blurred Genres*, argues that a new paradigm of knowledge is beginning to emerge simply because new questions no longer fit in old boxes.

Simply stated, I’m convinced that prospects for liberal learning will be enhanced as colleges and universities affirm the scholarship of integration and encourage members of the professoriate to be more attentive to works of synthesis and to cross-disciplinary studies.

*The Scholarship of Application.* Beyond the discovery and integration of knowledge, we suggest, as a third priority of academic life, *the scholarship of application*.

Historically, higher learning in this country has been viewed as being useful, “in the nation’s service,” as Woodrow Wilson put it. Today, however, there’s a growing feeling that higher education is a private benefit, *not* a public good. Increasingly, the campus is viewed as a place where professors get tenured and students get credentialed, while the overall work of the academy seems irrelevant to the nation’s most pressing social problems.

I’m convinced that higher education must respond to the educational and health and urban crises of our day, just as the land grant college responded to the needs of farmers a century ago – a commitment which can be viewed as a dimension of scholarship itself.

MIT professor Donald Schön, in his provocative book, *The Reflective Practitioner*, argues that scholars not only move from theory to practice, but from practice back to theory. In developing new priorities for the professoriate, we simply must give new dignity and new status to the *scholarship of application*.

*The Scholarship of Teaching*. Finally, scholarship is, by definition, a communal act. Disseminating or sharing knowledge makes the work of academic life complete, even in research, where we always say “research and publication,” suggesting that scholarly investigation takes on meaning only when it is passed on to others. Robert Oppenheimer, speaking at the 200th Anniversary of Columbia University, said “it is proper to the role of the scientist that he not merely find new truth but that he teach, that he try to bring the most honest and intelligible account of new knowledge to all who will try to learn.”

Great teachers keep the flame of scholarship alive. And surely that means teaching future scholars in the classroom. The simple truth is that almost all of us are where we are today because of the inspiration of an inspired teacher.

Let me return one more time to the coloring book. We urgently need clusters of colleges that break out of the unitarian model of faculty research and define scholarship broadly to include not just discovery, but integration, application, and teaching, as well. Such institutions are what I would call the New American College.

Second, within this paradigm, each New American College would find a blend of the characteristics that matches its own major traditions. For example, it would be enormously valuable for each college to ask, “What of our institutional resources and effort relate to discovery?” “What relates to integration?” “What relates to application?” “What relates to teaching?” And I could see a profile in which the answers peak around one primary function – service, for example, with discovery and integration being secondarily supported. Teaching, of course, is an educational and moral obligation at any institution where students are credentialed. All institutions probably have blends of all forms of scholarship. Still, a clearly defined institutional profile is required – with tough choices to be made.

Third, the New American College has a *reward* system that matches the college mission, while also being flexible enough to allow each faculty member to be creative, recognizing that professional interests keep changing. In our report, *Scholarship Reconsidered*, we suggest what we

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call “The Creativity Contract,” which makes it possible for a professor to define priorities within the overall mission of the institution. The larger point here is that at the New American College there is congruity between mission and faculty rewards.

Fourth, the New American College extends the meaning of scholarship to include students. Instead of having incoming students viewed as the great unwashed, they would be considered scholars in the making. The faculty and student cultures would be brought together as a true community of learning. As we argued in another report, *Campus Life*, a college or university should be, above all, an educationally purposive community, a place where faculty and students share academic goals and work together to strengthen teaching and learning.

Finally, the New American College is, above all else, an *integrative* institution, one with connections.

- Connections across the disciplines.
- Connections between general education and the major.
- Connections between faculty and students.
- Connections between the classroom and campus life.
- Connections between traditional education and life-long learning.
- And connections between the campus and the larger world.

The New American College can bring it all together, emphasizing that higher learning is not just engaged in discovery but also in integration, application, and teaching. Again, I would hope that out of the more than two thousand senior institutions in this country, we see a core of distinctive institutions merge; colleges that define with integrity their own distinctive mission, responsive to the external culture, to be sure, but driven most especially by deep confidence in what they are and what they must become. In the end that’s what the New American College is all about.

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