

REFLECTIONS ON THE STATE OF HIGHER EDUCATION: IT IS ONLY A PORT OF CALL*

Julie Johnson Kidd

For twenty-five years I have served at the helm of the Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation, a family foundation that has contributed over \$65 million to almost one hundred institutions of higher learning during that period alone. Over the course of my tenure I have met presidents, deans, and faculty from colleges in every region of the United States. Many of the foundation's grantees have been liberal arts colleges in the East. They are strong now, but were weaker institutions when the foundation first initiated its support. Additionally, the foundation has supported historically black colleges, Appalachian colleges, and American Indian higher education, as well as pioneering colleges in other parts of the United States and, most recently, in Europe.

As I reflect on this quarter century of involvement with higher education, I feel compelled to express my belief that American higher education has lost its bearings and is falling short in its vital educational mission. Although many generations have had the good fortune to participate in our system of higher learning and have benefited in many important ways, I believe that our system has developed serious flaws that interfere with its ability to develop in our young people the depth of critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, and human understanding so essential for dealing with the problems in our world today.

Most critics blame our educators for the shortcomings they see. I believe that the fault lies with a far broader set of constituencies, not only educators, but trustees, parents, and society at large. In my view, higher education can be no better than our collective expectations of its power to change lives. It can be no better than the readiness of students to make the most of what it offers. It can be no better than the level of financial support that we are willing to provide to meet our expectations, and no better than the philosophy we hold in establishing appropriate financial priorities. Finally, higher education can be no better than the imagination and vision we bring to it, coupled with our willingness to challenge traditional ways of thinking and acting.

I will argue that as a society we lack a clear, universally agreed on understanding of the place of higher education in young people's lives. We fail to nurture in students the emotional and intellectual characteristics necessary to gain from higher education its grandest lessons. We misunderstand and do not provide the financial and philosophical support necessary for students to achieve excellence. Finally, we lack vision, imagination, and boldness in thinking of ways to improve our institutions of higher learning.

For a vast majority of our eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds, life at college or university may become little more than a four-year frolic through late adolescence with a little

* This text was originally published in *Declining by Degrees: Higher Education at Risk*, eds. Richard H. Hersh and John Merrow. 2005, Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

learning thrown in along the way. Pockets of excellence do exist, particularly amongst the small liberal arts colleges, where some students are transformed and broadened in thrilling ways. Yet even those students could benefit more if the college environment encouraged their development as whole persons.

The Meaning of Higher Education

I believe that various educational constituencies frequently distort the place of higher education in the lives of young people. We understand fully the practical benefits of higher education but little about the intangible, deeper, and more far-reaching benefits. Parents often see going to college as an opportunity to build a peer network that can be helpful in the future or as the perfect arena for finding a mate. They may see college as a safe place to park young people until they are needed in the workforce; or attendance may be an unconscious means for insecure adults to gain prestige from their children's accomplishments. Too often, college becomes a way for students to make up what they should have learned in high school but did not. Thus we push our young people into an increasingly frenzied race for admission to our colleges and universities but often for reasons of secondary importance. Attendance at the "best" possible college or university becomes a necessary part of a "credentialing process," a sorting mechanism indicating levels of achievement that will become relevant in the workplace. These demands on higher education bear little relationship to education at all.

Pressuring our young people to attend college for such reasons addresses only the fringe benefits of education, fringe benefits that can be delivered as easily by mediocrity as by excellence. In light of such misplaced objectives for higher education for our children, is excellence even needed or relevant? What difference does it make if classes are large and lectures are dull? Does it matter that many graduates remain largely untouched intellectually or emotionally? Are our children truly "set for life" just because they weathered the storms of late adolescence, received the desired diploma, and established a network to help them find a job? Could this really be all that matters?

Excellence in higher education, however, can take a young person far beyond the practical benefits just enumerated. Excellence in education has the power to enrich and deepen the life experience, to open new vistas for consideration, and to develop critical thinking as a habit of mind. It helps students to develop ethical and moral principles by which to live, engendering compassion and open-mindedness and igniting the ability to see connections between diverse issues and ideas. Students learn to find inspiration and solace in the arts and to make the life of the mind and the heart the central features of a meaningful life. In an uncertain world in which challenges to our physical and economic well-being are many, qualities of mind and spirit may be the life force that sustains us.

We live in a world of far greater complexity than that of fifty years ago, and we cannot make sufficient sense of those complexities by the age of eighteen, even with the very best high school education. Our institutions of higher learning must prepare young people to deal with the challenges posed by cultural conflict, globalization, technological innovation, and environmental change, among other things. Consequently, we must rethink how the undergraduate experience can broaden the perspectives, understanding, and abilities of students to meet the challenges they will face throughout their lives. We must recognize the need to update our educational models so that our children will have the perspective and skills necessary to find ways to protect and nurture our planet and all its living beings into the future.

If these become our aspirations and goals for higher education, if we replace our currently more limited agenda with such a mission, we are bound to make a profound difference in the significance and quality of higher education. Such a mission would provide a framework for action, suggesting the measures and guideposts we need to make the changes that will inspire and transform. If higher education could approach this level of excellence, the fringe benefits would fall into place automatically.

Emotional and Intellectual Readiness for Education

If we really want excellence from our institutions of higher learning— that is, excellence in the intellectual, moral, and emotional development of our students as whole persons— then we must send them to college ready to learn and grow. They cannot be tired, burned out, confused, and alienated, whether as a result of overdetermination by their parents or as a function of the pressures of society as a whole.

Unfortunately, many of our students are lacking in sufficient emotional and intellectual preparation. They arrive at college carting their prescription medications, their refrigerators and microwaves, their depressions, their cynicisms, their well-honed abilities to cut corners, to game the system, to promote themselves, and with their underlying desires to escape it all at the next party, through binge drinking or worse. A conversation I recently had with a young exchange student from Germany, who is studying at one of our most prestigious universities, illustrates this point. He said that he was “shocked and horrified” by the life of the American undergraduate, citing, for example, his observation that the only thing on students’ minds seems to be where to get the next beer or find the next party.

It is the hunch of many of us that today’s students are really too exhausted to learn, too programmed to have any idea who they are, too depressed by this fact to be enthusiastic, and too tired to do anything about it but escape. There is already evidence that even less-pressured school environments gradually will be swept up in the powerful pull of this pulsating drive. Young people everywhere feel the pressure to have a piece of the materialistic American dream, whether through competition for admission to our most prestigious universities, through athletic prowess or through some other avenue to “success.” Others may reject this notion of the American dream but then become consumed and distracted with the overwhelming task of creating something meaningful with which to replace it.

What are the causes of this sad state of affairs among our young people? I believe they arise from the driving forces behind our culture, the driving forces behind almost everything we do—materialism and consumerism—and from the power of the mass media to shape what we think and desire. We have come to assume that the ultimate value in life is the marble bathroom equipped with a Jacuzzi as large as the average living room. Thus we ask only how to ensure that our children will be able to participate in this orgy of consumption and how to prove our own worth in this world of intense competition.

We as parents have a tendency to think of college as the last destination to which we must bring our children. If they attend college, preferably a prestigious one, they will be “set for life.” There will be nothing further that we must do for them. We do not send the message that college is a very important port of call, one in which students can fuel their minds and hearts for the lifetime of endeavor that lies ahead. But college is just that—only a port of call. It does not provide inoculation against the need to deal with problems of all sorts in later life. It is not the ultimate destination that makes or breaks you.

By making college the destination, the be-all and end-all of life, the ultimate statement of success for a young person and for his or her parents as well, we thwart the normal developmental process of childhood and adolescence. Young people cannot be prepared by overscheduling; they must be allowed the space to grow. Childhood should be a time of experimentation and self-discovery. By shifting the whole focus of those years onto resume building in preparation for the college admissions race, we inadvertently turn this vital time into a pressure cooker devoid of meaning. We rob young people of the opportunity to make their own decisions and thus come to know themselves. We do not teach them that it is aiming low, not failure, that they should avoid. We often protect them from the consequences of their actions and from taking responsibility for those actions.

Consider, for example, today's overscheduled, overachieving young person. Out of the home at age two, enrolled in an afterschool squash program by age eight (proficiency in squash might be his or her "ticket to the Ivies"), taking PSAT prep courses by grade nine at the latest, and from there on filling every moment with accomplishment, risk-taking, community service, experiences abroad, extracurricular activities, all in order to be acceptable to the college of one's choice. For others different pressures may predominate, such as the need for a twenty-hour workweek in addition to school to augment the family's income or to have the resources to keep up with peers with cars and credit cards. Although many of these activities are beneficial, when they are undertaken for the wrong reasons or under pressure, their essential value is negated. At any rate, for most, life means no time for slacking—get going, keep up, outdo, get all As, make sure you win the game. No time for pleasure reading, no time for a crossword puzzle, no time for a walk in the woods, unless it is part of an accredited course that will look good on your resume. A little cheating here and there—well, there is so much pressure on our kids that it is understandable that they'd have to cut corners somewhere. Don't dwell on it. Hurry on, get going, don't miss the deadline because it will all be worth it in the end. You'll be in college and you'll be set for life. No more worries, no more hurdles. The hardest part of college is getting there. Then you can relax. Then you can have fun. Then we won't have to worry about you anymore. Given this context, is it any wonder that these students are emotionally disadvantaged when they arrive at college?

The Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation has spent the last twenty-five years of its existence providing funding to help create the most imaginative, relevant, stimulating, and enthralling academic experiences possible for young people. Yet all the most compelling and broadening programs in the world, such as those at many of our small liberal arts colleges, will make little if any difference if students are not ready to reap the rewards of exposure to them or are too emotionally stunted to learn.

Conclusion

I would like to return to a theme raised at the beginning of my essay: Higher education will not improve until our own understanding of its potential in relation to the needs of our children broadens and deepens. Higher education should not be about prestige, credentialing, competition, ego gratification, escaping, killing time, or positioning oneself for a contract with the Los Angeles Lakers. It should be about the development of the whole person, and it should be only one port of call along the lifelong voyage of self-discovery and self-realization. Until we, as parents, let go of our extraneous notions and focus on the growth of our children and the development of their ability to find life rewarding no matter what may come their way, we will not be able to improve our system

of higher learning. Until our boards of trustees focus their attention away from rankings and onto what is taking place in the college community and the classroom, we will not be able to improve our system of higher learning. Faculties must realize that their first responsibility is to their students and that they must make the classroom experience more relevant to the “outside world,” as is increasingly the case at our small liberal arts colleges through their “engaged learning” courses. Until faculties are given the freedom to address that responsibility, many students will continue to be disinterested in the intellectual life of their colleges or universities and half-hearted in their commitment to learning. We must emphasize that a rewarding, satisfying life bears little necessary relationship to material wealth. We must also emphasize that the proper stewardship of financial resources can be beneficial in addressing global problems but that wealth is not an end in itself. This concept is little stressed in our national rhetoric or by our institutions of higher learning. Overall, our institutions must play a far more substantive role in fostering the ascendancy of profound values as the essence of human existence.

This review is by no means a comprehensive list of all the issues, but rather is a sampling of some of them. Without deep consideration with fresh and open minds, we will continue only to nibble around the edges of change rather than to develop a head-on challenge to the status quo. Without the changes that such a challenge can bring, we will relegate our young people to the role of commodities in a huge game of marketplace economics. The healthy emotional, ethical, and intellectual development of our young people should be our first priority. Failure to focus on these key issues obviously does not emanate from venal motives, but rather, I believe, from a lack of recognition of the seriousness and depth of the ever-growing malaise around us. If we do not take the time to address these issues collectively, we will be jeopardizing not only the well-being of our nation but also the future of our children and, indeed, of our planet.

(Abbreviated)

NOTES

1. Private conversations with college presidents.
2. James L. Shulman and William G. Bowen, *The Game of Life: College Sports and Educational Values* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).
3. Karen W. Arenson, “Yale President Wants to End Early Decisions for Admissions,” *New York Times*, December 13, 2001.
4. “In the Grip of the University,” *Independent School*, Winter 2003.

A critical mind, free of dogma but nourished by humane values, may be the most important product of education in a changing, fragmented society.

DEREK BOK

Kritická myseľ, zbavená dogiem, ale vystužená humanistickými hodnotami, je možno najdôležitejším výtvarným produktom vzdelávania v meniacej sa a rozpoltenej spoločnosti.

DEREK BOK