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ABSTRACT

There has been much talk in the last 10 years about the responsibility of higher education to help solve the urban crisis, yet little has been done. There are some measures the university can take to alleviate the educational plight of the urban poor, the major one of which is to do what they have traditionally done best: teach. The universities can accept larger numbers of minority group members in their freshmen classes, and give them the necessary supportive, remedial, and counseling services. They should encourage these students to enter the service fields: medicine, law, education, so that these students in turn can help the people in their communities. Universities could create special day-care facilities through high school experimental education units set up to serve a clientele of poor children; and universities could provide a second chance for those whose education was terminated at the high school level and who are competent and desirous of obtaining a degree. Since the most likely response of the universities will probably be in the direction of urban research, it will behoove them to be aware of two factors: (1) in terms of research that directly involves human beings, such as Moynihan's and Coleman's, they must be aware that the urban poor are tired of being objects of research; (2) in research concerning problems of the ghetto, such as housing, transportation, or pollution, it would be advisable to involve the residents themselves at the outset in any planning effort. (AF)

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Monday Morning, March 15

SOCIAL NEEDS AND ACADEMIC RESPONSES:
CLOSING THE GAP*

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Ladies and Gentlemen, I am highly honored to have been asked to address this 26th National Conference on Higher Education on that most pressing of our national problems--the role of the university in solving the urban crisis.

I must say that as I thought about this issue and about my own experiences, not only as a person who grew up in Harlem, but as a state legislator who represented that area, I am overwhelmed and distressed by the tangle of conflicting thoughts, the word "urban" conjures up. For the word is one of those sanitized euphemisms we have come to expect in modern day America. A word that masks the real meaning of what it is we hope to convey. At one time this country had a reputation for meeting its problems head on. At least that was the boast. Straight talk was the language that Americans understood best.

But modern day America has wrapped itself in a blanket of insufferable hypocrisy, of obscure language and oblique references, of sterile terms that do little to stem the growing distrust between black and white, or the young and the old; between our government and the people it is purportedly to serve.

Moreover, the lack of "straight talk" merely contributes to the communications gap. The people of the ghetto understand the current use of such subtle terminology as: the central city, the disadvantaged neighborhood, core city, urban areas, inner city, socio-economically depressed areas. Yes, the people of the ghetto understand this language - and they distrust it.

While some ghetto residents may not understand the sociological jargonese that tends to obscure rather than identify their problems, they know the route of their real problems. They know and understand that the route of their real problems lie in the employment, education, health and housing. I don't suppose that you find these remarks either startling or original.

What then is the relevance of these seemingly paranoid observations to the issue at hand. It is simply this: until we can bring ourselves to utter hitherto unacceptable or previously taboo ideas, until we speak frankly, in candid dialogue - "straight talk" if you will - our efforts to communicate our concerns to each other will be lost in a maze of double talk, of piety and platitudes and unfulfilled promises.

Now all that may seem strong. But when I walk up Lenox Avenue or Eighth Avenue or nearly any side street in Harlem, let me tell you, it's time for strong words and it's time for strong actions.

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Anyone in this room can quickly reel off the specifics of the crises of our times ...so often contained in the phrase "the crisis of our cities:"

The proliferation of narcotics; a welfare system which dehumanizes growing masses and ill-serves society or the individuals for whom it is allegedly designed; schools that don't educate; insufficient and inadequate health care; crime...in the streets, in the board rooms of corporations, in law enforcement; correctional institutions that incarcerate but don't correct; dilapidated housing which debilitates people and only shelters the resident rats and roaches.

Most of us are aware that the present unemployment rate in the black community is over 10%, for returning black Vietnam veterans it is 14%. for black youth the rate is 40%. Clearly, were major changes instituted in the overall economic and political orientation of this country, the unemployment rate among blacks would be immeasurably lower and there would consequently be a much diminished urban problem, if by this one means the incidence of violence, crime, ill health, and drug plagues among the minority youth in the inner city.

But, then, those are "urban" problems which are not always visible from the college campus. I assume that you would wish me to tell you what the universities can do within the limits of their resources. And, as I reflect on this problem, it occurs to me that the urban crisis has been recognized for at least the past ten years and I wonder why, in fact, the speaker is not the president of some university who would talk on the topic, "How My University Met the Urban Crisis." As I consider this issue, I realize that I should limit myself to the delineation of some steps which any university could undertake if it really desired to do something about the plight of the people in the inner cities...as was done for our immigrant population of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. I would expect that equal returns could be realized if we invested as much interest and enthusiasm as we did in the problems of an agrarian culture. Bi-lingual schools and land grant colleges were responses by educators and politicians to the needs of the times. Today, the school calendar continues to reflect the demands of an agrarian society. One of the central functions of education is to anticipate and to respond to the demands of the society. Curricular changes from the earliest colonial times have evidenced this fundamental philosophy. As Herman R. Goldberg, Superintendent of the Rochester City Schools has stated "Progress in man's education, emphasizes the inevitability of the schools as primary agents of needed social changes which will guarantee the very survival of our world." Ironically, we are investing more effort and money in training men to kill than in equipping them for dealing effectively with life in their environment.

I have deliberately avoided the global issues such as pollution, housing, and transportation, in order not to diffuse the main thrust of my argument, and in order not to let the university off the hook. Instead, I will concentrate on what seems to me to be rather obvious measures that universities can take to alleviate the educational plight of the urban poor....

My central theme is that universities do best what they have traditionally done - teach. Some obvious approaches are suggested by this thesis. First, that universities can accept larger numbers of blacks, Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, and Indians into their freshman classes. Having accepted them, they must be prepared to give them the necessary supportive, remedial and counselling services. Once prepared for regular courses, it is emphatically not the university's duty to pamper them or

suggest that they take easier paths to the degree. Instead, the universities should do all possible in terms of educational innovation so as to turn out larger numbers committed and competent in such fields as engineering, medicine, economics, chemistry, education, law, and business. The doctor-patient ratio in the core city is worse now than it was in the depths of the depression. We must be aware that as opportunities open up and increase for minority specialists in every occupation, the community left behind experiences an ever-increasing need. Bluntly put: in the context of our present society, as opportunities become available in the larger community, they come at the expense of the ghetto. The ghetto is stripped! And why? Because of the failure of the educational institutions to fulfill the purpose for which they were created. Sterile and unproductive teaching methods not only turn off young and probing minds, not only embitter these youngsters' parents and neighbors, but also demoralizes those dedicated teachers who find it difficult to overcome the cycle of failure.

Graduates in the service fields (medicine, law, education) will be of greater value to their communities than any number of million dollar urban research institutes. On that point, all teachers in inner city areas come from colleges. While I am far from casting all blame for the educational inadequacies of our children on their teachers, it is obvious that much fault rests with them and more particularly, with their educational preparation for teaching in the inner cities. Open up schools of education to new ways of thinking. Put young teacher-trainees in the elementary and high schools for a major part of their time in college. Have them learn Spanish, not "Spanglish" if they are teaching Puerto Rican or Chicano children. Develop methods of on-going training and certification to encourage them to keep learning. In short, prepare teachers for urban areas as carefully as you would prepare them to teach your own children.

Moreover, if schools of education are indeed the repositories of teaching methodology, then it would appear an easy step for universities to create special day-care through high school experimental educational units which would be attached to the university and would serve a clientele of poor children in much the same way that Hunter High School, attached to Hunter College in New York City, has long served the so-called "most brilliant" students in the city. Such satellite educational institutions could be kept small and grow only as they experienced educational success with their clientele.

Another area for university assistance to urban poor population lies in the provision of educational second-chances for those whose education was terminated at the high school level and who are competent and desirous of obtaining a degree. A black custodial helper at Columbia University, permitted to take creative writing courses solely because of his employee relationship, has recently authored a novel, which is about to be released by a major book publisher. The GI Bill of Rights has provided a massive demonstration of the value of second chance education. The Seek Program at the City University of New York is also providing dramatic examples. For such persons, universities can establish flexible scheduling of courses, special day-care facilities, and even special classes which could be held in the community in storefronts, churches, elementary schools, or other convenient locations. Muhammad, in effect, would go to the mountain.

I am certain that this simple list of things which I have stated could be expanded on indefinitely. But I think you see the core of my argument. It is concerned with the university's touching the urban poor simply and directly, and allocating some of its financial and intellectual resources to this effort. And yet, I know

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that there are innumerable institutional barriers to even this minimal attempt to relate to the urban scene. It seems to me, however, that the universities cannot begin to talk of global attacks on the problems of poverty until such time as they have put their houses in order. Please spare us white urbanologists and city planners until you have made the necessary steps to supply our communities with the educational wherewithal to create our own scientists and our own urban planners.

Having said that I would not consider global issues, I would nevertheless be remiss in my duties if I failed to say a few words on the topic of urban research, since this, despite my grave hesitations on the matter, is most likely the direction in which universities will move in response to the urban crisis.

Urban research can be divided into two categories: (1) research which directly impinges on human beings and attempts to analyze them. Into this category falls such research as Moynihan's work on the black family and Coleman's work on the education of black children; (2) research which deals with physical things; in other words, housing, transportation, pollution. In regard to the first class of research, that which involves poor people, I would suggest that the universities follow Talleyrand's advice to diplomats, "surtout, pas trop de zèle." Especially, not too much enthusiasm. The time has long past when poor people wish to be made the objects of research by scholars seeking to build their academic reputations. Rather, universities must find ways in which their urban research-bent sociologists and psychologists can use their technical skills to accomplish goals set forth and developed by the very communities which were formerly used as "urban laboratories." Briefly put, urban researchers should come to communities with the words, "I have these skills, how can they be of use to you?", rather than the words, "I have a \$100,000 grant to study the cognitive powers of black youth. I will need one experimental group and one control group from your school." The first approach is that of a friend, the second that of an extractive parasite. I am reminded of New York State education commissioner Ewald B. Nyquist's 1970 inaugural address and I quote, "with or without money, my single objective is to make the educational enterprise of this state more humanistic and less depersonalized. I mean by this, simply a way of looking at the world which emphasizes, instead of money and things, the importance of man, his nature, and central place in the universe which teaches that all persons have dignity and worth and that man was made just a little lower than the angels. Studies which provide joy and learning, pleasure and recreating a sense of self, programs that make a critical examination of the quality of life and society in the United States and what can be done about it, studies that lead to a repair of our ravaged environment and solve our social malignancies. We need to redress the values and imbalances of a technological and materialistic society with its emphasis on goods rather than the good things of life."

In regard to the second category of research, that concerned with such problems as housing and transportation, I should caution that academic experts not become so enamored of abstract, objective conceptualization, that they forget that physical objects exist to serve people, not vice versa. Thus, when they have to develop systems of mass transportation, for example, they might be better off in the long run if they involved the objects of their efforts - people - in their planning from the outset. I know, from long experience, that scholars find it difficult to believe that ordinary people can contribute intellectually to such planning processes. I also know that the net worth of their urban planning exercises would be measurably aided by just that contribution.

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In conclusion, my primary message to you is that the universities directly involve themselves in the education of poor people by expanding the universities' clientele to include them.

My secondary message is that the university should temper its research proclivities in urban people matters and ask the people how the university can aid them,

Finally, I have argued that "global" urban research matters should include the target communities from the beginning of the planning process.

Thank you for the opportunity of sharing these thoughts with you. I trust that they at least have given you some tangible sense of the directions in which I believe universities might move to confront the urban crisis.