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ABSTRACT

Common to the sentiments that led to the establishment of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the community college movement is the conviction that humanities education is vital to the everyday lives of all citizens and should not remain the province of only specialized scholars. Indeed, this conviction is expressed in the language of the legislation creating the NEH, an organization which has, despite the continual insistance of critics that the humanities are not for everyone, encouraged the provision of humanities instruction for all citizens who seek such learning. Such populist ideas are certainly not foreign to the community college movement which has its roots in the belief that the educational needs of the total society are not adequately served by large, established universities, which, as Abraham Flexner argued over 70 years ago, emphasize research at the expense of teaching. Although the community colleges eventually developed a strong commitment to vocational training, their populist heritage is currently emerging in growing demands for general education to help citizens cope with cultural pluralism, the loss of a sense of common good, and other perplexities of modern society. Thus the community colleges are now doing what the NEH had hoped that universities would do: democratizing knowledge through general education curricula which address ideals and values in addition to employable skills. (JP)

DO WE STILL BELIEVE WE CAN SHAPE SOCIETY?

by

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Remarks prepared for
American Association of Community and Junior Colleges
Annual Meeting
April 20, 1981
Washington, D. C.

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"DO WE STILL BELIEVE WE CAN SHAPE SOCIETY?"

I am honored by the invitation to share in the opening of your annual meeting. Though I am approaching the end of my term as Chairman of the NEH, I do not feel today like a lame duck and I do not want to use this occasion to sing a swan song.

The last three and a half years have been a time of great joy and satisfaction to me. I am proud of the many signs of progress in the area of humanities education made possible by cooperative endeavors between the National Endowment for the Humanities and the community colleges of America. These developments are due in no small measure to the leadership of men and women in this room this afternoon.

Ed Gleazer and Roger Yarrington and all of their colleagues at the AACJC have helped us reach out to faculty members in two year institutions of higher learning in every section of the United States through workshops and conferences on the humanities.

Since all NEH programs are competitive and there are no quotas for funding in any special categories, the fact of an increasing number of grants for curricular development and public projects to community colleges over the past three years testifies to quality proposals submitted to NEH panels from your institutions.

I am not unmindful with so many Presidents and Deans in the room that it is the cooperation and encouragement of administrators that is critical in these ventures.

I have just had an opportunity to look over some of the statistics prepared by Judy Jeffrey Howard concerning our most recent venture with the AACJC. I refer to the series of meetings organized around the theme "Strengthening the Humanities in Occupational Curricula." According to Dr. Howard's statistics, one hundred and twelve (112) institutions have participated in this recent round of workshops of which seventy-eight (78) were comprehensive community colleges representing thirty-seven states and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. Of those institutions, forty-six (46) have not received previous NEH grants.

All of this is impressive, but the main point I want to make today is not one of celebrating the record of cooperation between a small Federal government agency, the NEH, and the private association of state and local institutions, although it would be tempting to do that.

Nor do I want primarily to urge upon you further ventures into humanities education--although I hope it goes without saying that I would do that.

No, I want this afternoon, to say a word about some essential similarities between the goal which the Congress gave to the National Endowment for the Humanities fifteen years ago and the vision and goals of the community college movement today.

These two institutions, the NEH and the community colleges, have much in common. But that common vision, is in both cases, yet to be fully realized. It is now more a possibility than an achievement, and that is the burden of my message.

To argue my point, I need to go a bit into the history of both cases, that of the NEH and of the institutions which you represent.

Let me begin with the NEH.

At its inception the Congress used some language to describe the National Endowment for the Humanities and its mission, language to which some today find an embarrassment. That language has been and continues to be a source of controversy because it emphasizes in no uncertain terms, the accessibility of learning in the humanities to a broad public.

The language in the legislation creating the National Endowment for the Humanities suggests that there are qualities of mind and of judgment, of learning and of perspective which may arise from the study of literature, from the awareness of history, and the exercise of philosophy which are important to the health

and well-being of a democratic society. Therefore the language suggests, learning in the humanities is not simply the province of specialized academic scholars, it is equally important to citizens, ordinary men and women in their everyday lives.

When I came to the NEH nearly four years ago, I discovered a rather furious, full-scale, public debate being waged in cultural journals and in the arts sections or major newspapers about the National Endowment. The arguments centered around a question put this way: "Are the humanities elitist of populist?" Those who raised the question in that way had their own answer and they were ready to give it at a moments notice. The study of these areas of learning, they maintained, was not something for everyone. The humanities constituted a privileged area of discourse and study to be reserved for those with special backgrounds and credentials.

The implication was clear. The National Endowment for the Humanities should avoid trying to reach a wide public and should concentrate its resources on the great and established centers of scholarship and learning.

The view of the humanities in the minds of such critics is not one without a historical basis. For throughout much of history, such learning has been confined to privileged provinces and even within the history of education here in America, there is a basis for their view. Not many years ago, indeed, in the years when I was an undergraduate, and I suspect the same is true for many of you, what we today call the humanities were regarded as areas of learning for "gentlemen." Indeed, one college which I recently examined during the early 1950's, described the disciplines of the humanities as the areas of "polite learning." But that tradition in the humanities is only one point of view. There is another, newer tradition, which values high scholarship just as much as the older one, but which has also a high regard for humane teaching.

This is the tradition which seeks to push back the frontiers of learning so as to include areas of human activity which are often neglected by provincial and podantic scholars. We see this tradition in the work of many historians today, who are trying to uncover some of the invisible aspects of American history. The history of occupations, the everyday lives of the ordinary citizens, of the experiences of the immigrants, of regional history.

I believe that the National Endowment for the Humanities must give itself to the task of encouraging opportunities for learning in the humanities for everyone in the society who seeks such learning and who is ready to accept the disciplines of such learning.

When I came to the National Endowment four years ago and appeared before the United States Senate for confirmation, I expressed my vision and hope for the NEH in the following words:

"I regard our institutions of higher education" as "a major national resource not only for the training of the young, but for citizens of all ages. These institutions are a critical resource, not only of education and technique and technology, in science and theory, but also in sensitivity to those qualities of mind which make life worth living and a society worthy of commitment and sacrifice."

"Humanistic study often demands highly specialized research and technical work, but unlike some other areas of knowledge, the goal of humanities scholarship is not the invention of a new machine or technique, or even the discovery of a solution to a problem -- the goal is the gaining of insight, of perspective and understanding, and the work of the humanities is not completed until that insight is accessible to those men and women everywhere who are willing and able to accept the discipline of seeking such understanding."

"I want," I said as I came to NEH in 1977, "to see an America proud of its scholars and of its intellectual achievement."

"I want to see a scholarly community with a high sense of professional and social responsibility which turns away from trivial pedantry."

"I want to see an America in which all citizens with a native curiosity to inquire into the human heritage or to increase their skill in language and reason, find encouragement and opportunity."

I will leave for others to judge how much in the last three and a half years the Endowment has moved toward these goals. For my own part, I believe we have made some progress. But much remains to be done and the progress we have made is due in no small measure to my colleagues at the NEH, many of whom as career and professional government employees will remain under a new Chairman.

But the NEH is still a young and new agency, and the promise of the contribution of learning in the humanities to our society is still there. And so I look to the future with hope and anticipation, knowing that others will come along to take up this work and this challenge.

Let me then at this point turn to the history of the community college movement in America.

Community colleges are the most recent additions to the broad range of institutions within the network of American higher education. That whole network today is troubled and threatened by what seems to be a decline of public commitment as well as the inflation of operating costs and a decline in student enrollment. In large measure, the emergence of the community colleges originally was due to a sense that there were some needs in our society not met by the older, more established institutions of higher education. That sense of unmet needs, however, did not begin with returning veterans from World War II, nor did it begin with first generation students seeking opportunities for higher education in the 1960's and '70's. That sense of unrest goes back further in American higher education.

I recently had an opportunity to read for the first time a classic and still relevant analysis of the problems of higher education published nearly seventy (70) years ago. The book is one of a series of neglected classics in the history of American education edited by President Lawrence Cremin of Teachers College at Columbia University. The book is by Abraham Flexner who did so much to reform professional education in the early part of this century. Published in 1908, the book was entitled The American College: A Criticism.

In the 1969 issue of this classic, President Cremin warns us that in looking back at Abraham Flexner's writings, we should remember that, as Cremin points out, "particular ideas and doctrines" in the book "have been outmoded or superceeded." In a chronological sense that is true--for Flexner's criticisms of American colleges have been followed by a great many more detailed writings. But the most timely criticism and analysis of many areas of life is not always the most recent one, and so I found myself intrigued in the way Flexner was writing about American higher education in the year 1908.

He was troubled by the decline of teaching and the emphasis on research in the academic world. Flexner wrote that every place he looked, in public and private institutions alike, the needs and goals of research were appropriating resources to the neglect and teaching of students. In his time, he argued, that the interests of teaching were often "distinct from or prior to or /even/ inconsistent with the interests of research".

In Flexner's view it was not simply students that suffered from this imbalance, but the institutions of higher learning as well. Of his own time Flexner wrote, "Our college authorities are far from happy. They dwell complacently on rapidly increasing numbers, splendid 'plants', and the unchecked flow of benefaction, but there is considerable uneasiness just below the surface. The pilots are apparently not sure whither to steer. At times they

steer for several ports at once or /for/ no particular port at all."

Though it may have been over three score and and ten years since those comments were written, they could easily apply to the situation in higher education throughout the 1970's and 1980's. The feeling of drift and uncertainty have not abated. In retrospect, the expansion of the large universities may have actually accelerated the feeling of drift and loss of purpose. For many years we believed expansion meant progress, but now we are not so sure. We suspect it may have actually had a disintegrating affect upon the quality of instruction and learning.

Back then some years before World War I, Flexner had the vision of what he called "a way out." "Our urgent need," Flexner wrote, "is of institutions of a different type. Institutions that in contrast to the great educational factories that exist to supply a market, will embody the tentative and inquiring spirit." Thus, he said, "a splendid opportunity awaits a school outside the present system."

It would be stretching the point a bit for me to claim that Abraham Flexner foresaw the emergence of the community-based college in America. When those colleges finally emerged, it was to a large extent with educational goals centered around vocational training rather than the humanities or general learning. Yet there have always been those who saw the mission of the community colleges in larger terms than vocational and technical training, in terms which measure success by service to the community and which relate to that body of knowledge and program of learning that we call the humanities.

There are, I believe, encouraging signs that this other vision of the role of the community college has by no means been abandoned. Indeed, it is yet to be fulfilled. There are some encouraging signs that we may someday reach this goal.

Anyone who has been following the debate in American higher education today, will sense immediately that there is more to the discussion than shrinking budgets and troubling demographic projections. There are genuine issues of purpose, of mission, of the nature and goals of education today, which are at the center of the debate. It may be that community colleges will yet emerge from the current examination of the essential role that education should play -- with an even greater sense of purpose.

We read today of experiments and trials within many colleges and universities having to do with the quest for a core curriculum--the search for a consensus of that knowledge which constitutes the essential awareness necessary for participation as citizens in this

republic, what some call general education.

There are several reasons why this concern has become so prominent today. One reason is the changing nature of vocational and technical life. Technical training and specialized education play a critical role in our economy. But more and more, we have become aware that the skills of job training are not the first requirement of education. The individual able to express himself or herself -- who is at home with the language, having a sense of identity gained through an awareness of culture and history--is in the best position to learn and relearn the skills required for job oriented or technical education. You have all been reminded before, I am sure, of the fact that 65 per cent of the jobs in our ecomony today require training of approximately three days on the job itself, and that only ten per cent of our jobs require training of more than six months.

Today we have become aware that the cultural pluralism which we have recently celebrated, the diversity of races, heritages, and backgrounds which have gone into the making of America, poses today, tremendous problems in trying to fashion a sense of common purpose, common citizenship, and common culture. The goals and achievements of basic education, of the teaching of an essential core of fact, understanding, and interpretation, have become critical to the functioning of a democratic society.

Every thoughtful analyst of the present American scene, speaks of a loss of a sense of social identity, of community -- the isolating impact of a kind of defiant individualism -- the temptations to self concern at the cost of social responsibility -- the loss of a sense of common good.

And time and again, such thoughtful critics tell us that a major part of the problem is a loss of a sense of history, of memory, of tradition and heritage. Indeed, our nation has been described recently by one critic, as suffering from a state of collective amnesia. Now the very meaning of the humanities, is associated with this ability to see and understand the past, to grasp a sense of civilization, to see the continuities within the past and to understand how the choices and values of men and women who have gone before us have helped to determine the course of nations.

This in fact, is what talk of general education is all about. Let me cite the following paragraph from the excellent book by Ernest Boyer and Martin Kaplan on General Education published several years ago:

> "Colleges have an obligation to help the human race remember where it has been and

> how, for better or worse, it got where it is. All students must be introduced to the events, individual ideas, texts, and value systems that have contributed consequentially to human gains and losses. An understanding of this past from which all of us spring, should be required of all students.
>
> If colleges do not help keep the past alive and help every student to discover his or her own time perspective, we will not only have lost all memory, but bankrupted our future as well."

A few weeks ago I was asked to supply a title for these opening remarks. I took my cue from the general theme of the conference: "The Shaping of Society, the Community College Role."

As you begin this round of meetings, seminars and professional discussions, I ask you this afternoon to carry the following question with you: "Do we still believe that we can do anything to shape society?"

It is clear that our forefathers believed that they could do so. They believed in the power of ideas and ideals to shape the future. They believed that what they did in their own time mattered at every level. In the example they set for the next generation, in the stewardship of institutions which were passed on to them, in the faithfulness with which they did their daily work, in the ideals which they set before the young which they steered the institutions entrusted to them. They believed that because they accepted the idea of this nation as a great achievement in human history still evolving, developing with an open future.

The question today is, do we still believe that is the case? If we do, then our task is clear. We must make our institutions serve the needs -- the neglected needs, of our time. One of those needs is for greater attention to education in the humanities at every level of the educational system -- for a strong commitment to work out a scheme of basic education for students who will go on to become parents, husbands, wives, and citizens as well as consumers and producers. This clearly means the turning back of narrow specialization in our institutions of higher learning, including our community colleges.

It is easy to understand in historical perspective why community colleges have concentrated upon career education. But today, your potential for flexibility, for taking up the challenge of general education, is perhaps even greater than many four year colleges and

universities. There are forces within the network of community colleges in America that are pushing for reform; these should be regarded as a challenge and not a threat. Your survival is ensured because you have the capacity to change.

When I came to the Endowment in 1977, I perceived what my predecessors had perceived before me -- that while the universities were becoming more specialized and vocational in their own ways, the community colleges were loosening up, seeking to generalize their curricula, adding courses addressed to questions of ideals and values, as well as techniques.

Some of this stirring up could be written off to ambition. Community colleges, like the universities, wanted to expand their power and recognition. But they seemed as well, to be expanding within their communities, building upon their natural social bases and learning from the people they were teaching. The stirrings then, were more than ripples from institutional ambitions. They were statements of community wisdom and dissatisfaction, an avowal that the good life does not rise upon a foundation of materialism alone. Training and the uses of tools and technologies is not sufficient for life itself.

It appears to me that the community colleges are doing what we at the Endowment would hope the universities would do. They are beginning to restore a functional relationship between the concerns of the humanities and the lives people live. Not on a grand scale, not on a national scale, but in many separate localities. The Center for the Study of Community Colleges reports tremendous interest in courses in ethical perspectives on occupational issues; courses in human services which emphasize cross-cultural understanding; courses proceeding from the study of popular culture to an examination of the arts and literature in historical perspective. At some community colleges, history is taught in a way that takes in the great achievements of mankind in verbal and non-verbal fields - literature, fine arts, philosophy, science, technology...

I cannot tell you how successful these courses are. In fact, you could tell me. But I can say that teaching history this way could be a key to restoring that functional relationship between the humanities and our ordinary lives, between the great thought of the past, and the loyalties and purposes we cling to today. That is what the NEH is trying to do, that is what the Congress asked it to do fifteen years ago, and that is what your institutions are capable of doing.

If our large universities persist in the direction of specialization at the cost of general education, and in the direction of research at the cost of undergraduate instruction, then our community colleges may yet, indeed, realize what Abraham Flexner

described those many years ago as their "splendid opportunity." How ironic, but not unforseen it would be, if the future of general education were bound up with the future of our community colleges.

Then, we might say, that the democratization of knowledge in America, had borne its sweetest fruit.