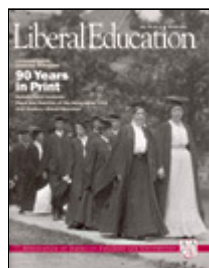


**RESOURCES ON:**

LIBERAL EDUCATION
 GENERAL EDUCATION
 CURRICULUM
 FACULTY
 INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE
 ASSESSMENT
 DIVERSITY
 CIVIC ENGAGEMENT
 SCIENCE & HEALTH
 WOMEN
 GLOBAL LEARNING

**Liberal Education, Winter 2004****The Place and Function of the Proposed Association***By Robert L. Kelly*

At the time of the founding of the Association of American Colleges in 1915, the role of the four-year, residential, undergraduate college in American higher education was being challenged by the expansion of the state universities. In some regions of the country, leaders of the undergraduate colleges, whether denominational or independent, saw their very existence threatened. Replacing Dr. P. P. Claxton, the founding president, in an address at the first annual meeting, cited some criticisms of those who saw no need for such an association, and he responds with his ideas for the association.

His vision of a national organization transcending regional differences focused on what these colleges as a united body could contribute to undergraduate education and indirectly to the rich national diversity that builds a strong democratic nation. His choice of a closing line, echoing the founding fathers at the time of the American Revolution, forcefully conveys his conviction of the high purpose he sees for the new Association.

--Editor

The topic before us this morning is the place and function of the proposed Association; we may appropriately spend a few moments in considering that phase of the general topic. There have been certain doubts expressed in reference to the advisability of an organization of this kind. It has been suggested that we do not seem to have any very definitely outlined policy; that the purpose of the organization is expressed, if expressed at all, in somewhat vague terms; and the question is asked, "What do you hope to accomplish by an organization of this kind?" One of the well known educational men of the United States said to me, in a conference upon the subject, "Well, if you get this organization formed, the college presidents of the country will at least have one other place to go." One of the college presidents of New England made the objection that New England has an Association of Colleges, and it does not seem worth while to join in an American movement. A college president in New York wrote to the same effect, and suggested that probably the colleges of the central west had a number of problems which were sufficiently alike in their nature to justify an organization of this character, but he did not believe that it could be national in scope. The suggestion has come from one of the college executives of the south that there is an association among the southern colleges, and that it is scarcely worth while for the southern institutions, therefore, to join in a national movement.

LINKS

[About Lit Educatio](#)
[Current I](#)
[Previous](#)
[Ordering](#)
[Permissi Offprints](#)
[Future T](#)
[Writer's C](#)
[Author Ir](#)
[Subject I](#)

From such criticisms as these, it appears, gentlemen, that so far as educational matters are concerned, we have not yet risen above sectional lines. Politically, we have become a nation; educationally it seems that there is still a considerable amount of state and sectional feeling. Now, one of the purposes of an association of this sort undoubtedly would be to wipe off the map any such things as an educational north, south, east or west. There was a time in the history of the American Republic when a man stood up in the Senate of the United States and boasted that he came from South Carolina, and was interested chiefly in the problems of South Carolina; and there has been a time in the history of American politics when men have made the same sort of statement regarding the States of Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and others. It appears, therefore, that in the world of education, we need to get a larger vision as politically we have already done.

Then this objection has been raised, that we have too many kinds of institutions for a functioning body. It is true, of course, that we have colleges in this country that are well endowed, and colleges that have no endowment; we have colleges with high educational standards, and we have colleges with low educational standards; we have colleges which vary one from the other in a multitude of points. There is neither time nor need to catalogue the many differences. It is said that in the midst of such conditions we cannot have a national organization.

And yet, gentlemen, in other lines than educational work that is just exactly what America has done, and is doing. Many of our citizens are of German, Italian, and Bohemian descent. We have within the limits of our country Puritans, Knickerbockers, Cavaliers, Cowboys and Hoosiers. We have among us Hebrews and Catholics, Mormons, Mohammedans and Methodists. We have Republicans, Democrats and Socialists. We have indeed a great conglomeration of citizenship, from one point of view; but above all and beyond all we have American citizens. There is such a thing as an American spirit, as the soul of America.

Now, the question has been raised: Why should not the colleges, which are the formative centers of our civilization, the institutions that preeminently will make or mar this country, join in interpreting the meaning of this genius of America, in fostering its development, and in determining to some extents its destiny? We differ in many things, educationally, and in many other respects; but fundamentally as Americans, we are all alike, and our problems are all alike.

Take a New Yorker, a Catholic, a Cowboy, a Socialist, and an Americanized Bohemian, and they possess certain fundamental things in common. They possess a sense of self-reliance, a desire for fair play, a limitless fund of energy, a desire for order and social cooperation, and an ambition for self realization; and these are the traits, or some of them, at least, which we may call distinctive American traits, and which our colleges should join in fostering. The things which we have in common are more numerous than the things which separate us. How much war would there be today if Europe had a European spirit rather than a German spirit, an English spirit, and a French spirit. Shall we not glory in the fact that we have an American spirit, and that we who are here have been placed in positions of responsibility, such that we may help in guiding the destinies of America as we foster that spirit?

It seems to me--and I think that all agree to this--that advance is made as we socialize larger and larger groups; and the fundamental purpose, perhaps, of this organization is that we shall become a social solidarity, so far as our higher institutions of learning are concerned--those institutions not under state control. We have been treated with a splendid view of what the possibilities of a united effort are in the vigorous and successful work which is being done by the mission

workers, not only of this country, but of the world, under the leadership of John R. Mott. We know what tremendous vitality was breathed into the educational situation in the south, as a few years ago the men of that section joined in a great educational revival. Many of you who are here this morning heard that statesman-like suggestion yesterday of Secretary Evans of the University of Pennsylvania. Secretary Evans called attention to the fact that the Y.M.C.A. has conferences at Northfield, Geneva, and other places; and the suggestion he made was this, that those conferences become not Y.M.C.A. conferences, but conferences of religious leaders in America, with members of the Y.M.C.A., members of the Church, and members of any other organizations that believe there is a fundamental need for the development of religion in this country. We have not yet developed a national educational consciousness; and in general terms the purpose of this organization is that we may do that thing.

Now, there is a more practical phase of this question. The leaders of the American Revolution were heartened by the fact that there had been an English revolution that had succeeded. The English revolution had worked, and our forefathers said, "Since that revolution has succeeded, we can have what we want in this country also." There is, as we all know, an Association of State Universities that has succeeded. Marked success has attended the efforts of the men who have joined together in that organization and the question is raised: What the State Universities have done in their way, cannot the non-tax supported institutions do in their way? It is the belief of the promoters of this organization that that question should be answered in the affirmative; and to come down to the vital point, in answer to the question as to why we are attempting to organize an association of this kind, perhaps it might be said that if the American colleges do not hang together, they are likely to hang separately.

Robert L. Kelly was the president of Earlham College in 1915. He was the founding president of the Association of American Colleges. He served as AAC president in 1915-1916, and he later served as executive secretary of the Association.

To respond to this article, e-mail: liberaled@aacu.org, with author's name on the subject line.