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INDEPENDENT COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES: A FORCE FOR CONSTRUCTIVE CHANGE

Speech Before the Annual Meeting of the
American Association of Presidents of Independent Colleges and Universities
Scottsdale, Arizona
February 23, 1995

Appropriate acknowledgments.

Ladies and gentlemen, I welcome the opportunity to join you on the occasion of your annual meeting, to express my admiration for the unique and essential contributions you and your respective institutions are making to our country and to the cause of learning generally, and to contribute as best I can to your deliberations.

Tom Corts, your president, and Rex Lee, your first vice-president, have very kindly arranged for these remarks to be shared with you this evening, but I take full responsibility for their substance and the manner of their delivery.

Your conference theme, Virtue Reality, is an intriguing one. This is so not only because of the intrinsic conceptual interest it possesses, and not only because of its operative significance in our fractured and fractious society, but also because questions of virtue, ethics, morality, and goodness tend not to rise to levels of explicit consideration and discourse at meetings of the heads of American colleges and universities, burdened as such meetings typically are with the more mundane, mechanistic, and familiar considerations of governance, administration, finance, development, athletics, and public, alumni and governmental relations.

I welcome, therefore, the opportunity to offer some comments on your chosen theme.

We are living in a time of acute modernity: the rise of urbanization; the mass dislocation and migration of peoples; the specialization of knowledge; the industrialization of labor; the technological revolution and modern science.

These and the related forces and pressures they engender carry profound implications for our world and nation. They also implicate our colleges and universities in fundamental ways, e.g., they influence the nature and character of the curricula, the selection of those who comprise the student bodies, the pedagogy, the criteria for the appointment and advancement of faculty members, and the choice of those who lead our institutions of higher learning.

The forces of modernity are mainly centrifugal rather than centripetal in their effect: they subordinate the more human aspects of daily life to the more instrumental, mechanistic and bureaucratic ones; they cultivate an especially debilitating form of moral relativism in people's lives and an insidious cultural nihilism in the larger society; they tend to decouple the beliefs and actions of individuals and groups from the consequences such beliefs and actions carry for others, thus shrinking one's sense of compassion, humaneness and personal responsibility; they tend to supplant the more transcendent, even spiritual principles and values, with the more common and utilitarian ones; and they spread a generalized sense of indifference, masquerading as tolerance, toward acts and utterances that fundamentally undermine the self-restraint, good will, generosity of means and spirit, and common sense that are such vital aspects of civil society.

Does this analysis overstate the problem? I think not. In any event, it surely does not understate it. For example, one need only to reflect upon the myriad of social problems our own nation confronts: the decline of our families; the erosion of the average person's economic well-being; the rise of government and the concomitant shrinkage in our private lives, endeavors, and impulses, the bureaucratization of our institutions; the centralization of power and authority; the rise of crime and the underclass; the increased use of drugs; the erosion of our schools; the

debasement of our literature and music; the ordinariness of the media; the trivializing of our public life and political discourse; the coarsening of relations between the races; and the mean-spiritedness so often experienced in daily life.

The effect of modernity on the less-developed countries of the world is even more pronounced and consequential: political and social instability, environmental degradation, crime, ethnic strife, economic dislocations and the migrations of people. In many respects it seems that the world's great struggle is not so much about nation's contending as about their peoples struggling to cope with the forces of modernity, especially as they impact their traditions, religions, ways of life, and intergenerational relations.

But can it be alleged that these forces of modernity are, in and of themselves, the root cause of these problems, seemingly inexorable and inevitable in their effect? Or are they merely objective factors in a changing world to be engaged or deflected, absorbed or rejected at will? Or are they simply the texture of modern life within which an individual chooses his or her own life style from whatever values and considerations suit each person? Or are they merely forces ephemeral to the central lives of people but which randomly work their influence, sometimes for our benefit and sometimes to our great harm?

I do not profess to have either the insight or the capacity to venture a confident answer to each of these questions, except to assert that these forces are operating in American life and, on balance, the consequences, whether inevitable or avoidable have come to influence our society at its core: disturbing, disquieting, radical and implicating our present and future as few forces and influence in history have ever done.

There is widespread belief that our society has lost its grip, that the familiar and steady moorings no longer secure the ship of state, that we are at sea, rudderless, and, thus, unclear about our

destination, confused about our values, unconfident about our priorities, unsure of ourselves and others. We feel threatened. Ours is a diminished spirit struggling for meaning, seeking context, and troubled.

It should not be surprising, therefore, that as one of our society's most central of institutions, our colleges and universities should be experiencing a rising tide of public unhappiness about their work. Open any newspaper--and a growing number of books--and one is likely to find some new criticism of our institutions of higher learning: the alleged misuses of federal research funds; athletic scandals; rising student fees and tuitions; racial preferences in admission policies and faculty appointments and promotions; so-called hate speech on campuses and contention over what to do about it; the teaching loads of faculty members and the criteria employed in assessing the worth and importance of their performance; the perceived neglect of the lower-division student and excessive use of teaching assistants; oversized and overpaid administrations; and the durable debate over political correctness.

People hold these criticisms of our colleges and universities, and neither they nor the criticisms will simply disappear. It is also true, of course, that the criticism is not always fair or accurate. It is often exaggerated or overgeneralized and it is often uninformed and inconsistent. Moreover, our colleges and universities are, more often than is recognized, finding solutions to these problems. And, finally, each institution is not afflicted with each of these problems and may, in fact, in individual instances not be contending with any of them. But as we all know, "hell hath no wrath like the non-combatant."

My own view, however salient the criticisms may be, is that the critics have missed the real target. I do not mean that these criticisms are without merit, or that these issues are not real and require serious study and corrective action by those in positions of responsibility. I do mean, however that the sources of the public's disquietude about our colleges and universities arise less from an

objective appraisal of their more publicized shortcomings than from a subjective sense of unarticulated apprehension about modern life in general that looks in vain to our institutions of higher learning for explanation, discernment, insight, and acknowledgment.

By focusing mistakenly on the more ephemeral or popularized issues of the hour, the critics fail to see that the most profound and least apprehended challenge confronting our colleges and universities is the need for them to make better sense of their lower-division curricula, to connect their coursework to authentic and comprehensible educational objectives, to clarify the link between their standards for admission and what they expect of their students, and to take more explicit curricular account of the nature and character of the society in which we live, the forces that helped form our present condition, and to compare and contrast these with other peoples and cultures for the insight such studies nearly always afford.

What we have instead, and I am now generalizing, is a curriculum for our lower-division students that principally is an extension of the more specialized work undertaken at the upper-division and graduate levels, driven by the academic values and valuing of academic work in our system of rewards, and molded by the perceived exigencies of our disciplinary and departmental structures. It is not driven by the needs of the students whose curricular appetites during their first two years of college life lack discernment, if I may understate it. Our "breadth and depth" requirements (a cafeteria of courses where the main course and the dessert are easily confused), by and large, reflect compromises and trade-offs among and between the academic disciplines whose interests reflect not so much the needs of students as those of their professors whose careers are much implicated by the proportion of time devoted to teaching and research and whose inclinations to further the latter quite naturally come to subordinate the needs of students to those of the profession.

The specialization of modern life drives the curriculum as it tends to drive so much of our living: ever narrower the focus, ever more specialized the knowledge, ever more limiting of one's sense of self in the larger society and of one's sense of place in the workforce. Our curriculum and the pedagogy employed in teaching it are more a parody of modern life than a light to a confused and deeply troubled nation. While our colleges and universities have been weakened by criticism from without and by contention from within, they are less weakened fundamentally than all but a handful of institutions in our society; and, of those, they remain the ones best able to help us through the transition from where we have been to wherever we are headed.

They will be able to do so, however, only by refocusing their attentions, reordering their priorities, realigning their resources and recommitting themselves to their most fundamental of purposes, viz., to transmit the culture from one generation to the next. And I do not mean to limit the culture only to the offering of traditional, disciplinary-based courses, however they might be rearranged as a gesture toward change and innovation. I also mean to include research, to infuse what we learn into what we teach, to foster cross-disciplinary teaching and interdisciplinary coursework and to take the needs of our students, rather than the needs of the academic disciplines, as the principal point of departure in the construction of our curricula. This would require a very different way of making decisions within the academy and a substantial change in the now familiar system of institutional rewards and values.

I also mean to allow for what we once did routinely but have not done for a very long time, i.e., to help our students develop a sense of personal responsibility, ethical behavior, honesty in one's dealings and those other virtues that make it possible for knowledge to be engaged for moral and principled purposes rather than merely for self-interested or even amoral ones.

The construction of such a curriculum should be welcoming of interdisciplinary teaching, accommodating of differing styles of learning and ways of knowing, sensitive to the highly

pluralistic and diverse student body, anticipating the world in which today's students will most likely live the larger part of their personal and professional lives, and intellectually challenging and demanding.

Courses taken, subjects studied, and lectures and labs attended, of course, comprise the main but not the whole of the learning experience or environment within which this work can be carried on. While this is especially true of the residential setting, it should also be mostly true of the commuter college and university as well. And it is in this larger campus and community environment and broader context that the character and inner integrity of the individual student can and should be primarily developed: in the residence halls, on the athletic fields, in the clubs, fraternities, and sororities, in community service, in the mundane interactions of daily life--in short, by enriching the out-of-class experience in ways that cultivate virtuous living and ethical deportment on the part of our students. It is here that the virtuous life, honesty, compassion, tolerance, the common good, good will and good works can be fostered, cultivated, encouraged, and imbued. Such attributes, if successfully sought and secured in this setting will surely help infuse one's studies and classrooms with these qualities, informing the discussion, illuminating the issues, animating the teaching and learning and imbuing the whole experience with perspectives and insights now largely lacking from what has come to be a mostly sterile and disengaged general education curriculum, one to be gotten out of the way and hurried through with little evident regard by the student for its educational significance, personal meaning, or inherent worth.

The colleges and universities composing your membership are, by definition, those most likely to support this call, most likely already to have in place programs and activities intended to allay the dysfunctions of the modern curriculum and campus life while seeking to cultivate among your students the personal qualities and attributes to which I have referred. But even if this is so, even if imperfectly so as I suspect, your voices should be heard more fully and more frequently. Within the higher education community at large, your messages should be accorded a broader audience

reaching usefully and constructively to the higher reaches of government and, through the popular media to the people of America whose present sense of self and straightened circumstances are prompting them to seek a surer road and steadier social and ethical environment for themselves and their country.

Your commitment to take a broader rather than a narrower view of your charge, to take a more humane than mechanistic approach to your responsibilities, to take a less rather than a more apologetic tone to the task of equipping your students with character as well as with a fund of knowledge, to take a more demanding rather than a more ambiguous view of your students' obligations and responsibilities--all these and others help define the critical role your institutions play in contemporary American higher education.

It will be said, of course, that it is easier for the independent colleges and universities to do this than for the public ones. This is surely true and is one of the basic arguments for the private sector to be maintained and sustained in an otherwise highly secularized and mostly morally indifferent world. But to say it is harder in the public sector is not to say that it is impossible. Indeed, for most of public higher education, historically speaking, it has not been impossible, only difficult.

It is today, however, thought to be impossible for our public colleges and universities to take account of the values, morality, and character formation that are regarded as integral to your work and so foreign to theirs. This is so not because these are thought to be inappropriate objects for institutional attention and commitment, but rather because some in the larger society are thought to be hostile to their inclusion and because there is so little agreement within the academic profession about how or whether to address this issue. In this sense, these institutions are as lost as the larger society, lacking confidence, unsure of their essential purposes, ambiguous

and vacillating about their larger societal role and fearful of offending. The students, of course, are the losers in all of this even if everyone else feels less threatened.

I urge you to be an animating force for constructive change, even a voice of constructive defiance against the times, and, thus, a voice on behalf of a weakened society seeking to strengthen itself. Perhaps one example from English history will make the point, will afford you a sense of your own possibilities and will enable all of us to sense that what is sometimes the source of our despair can prove also to be the source that energizes and drives us to a more constructive outcome.

It recalls the origin of Clare College, one of the colleges of Cambridge University in England. Lord Ashby, a good friend who was at one time the Master of Clare College and Vice Chancellor of the University shared it with me. Let me tell it to you in his words:

[Clare College at Cambridge is named after] Elizabeth de Clare, who founded it over 600 years ago. She was the granddaughter of a king. She had a tragic life. At the age of thirty she was three times a widow. Three men dear to her died by violence: her brother was killed in a battle against the Scots, her son was assassinated in Ireland at the age of twenty; her third husband died in civil war. Enough to break the spirit of any woman and to harden her heart against the world. But it didn't break the spirit of an Elizabeth de Clare. She spent her long life managing her estates and helping the needy. In the year 1349 an appalling disaster crossed Europe. The great pestilence, it was called. In the summer of that year it reached England and killed one-third of the population; the scale of calamity which might occur in a nuclear war in Europe. Elizabeth de Clare survived the disaster. And her response to it? This is what she wrote:

*. . . because so many have been carried off by the plague,
knowledge is now
beginning to be lamentably lacking among men . . .*

and to remedy this she endowed a college in order (as she put it)

to advance divine learning and to benefit the State.

This was her act of constructive defiance against the destiny of the time in which she lived; and Clare College survives today as a vital and functioning part of that great University. We should take heart and courage from her example.