

SOUTHEASTERN COMMUNITY COLLEGE  
WHITEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA  
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COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

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PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF TERTIARY  
EDUCATION

(beyond high school)

BACKGROUND: Created in 1965, it serves North Carolina southeastern counties with more than 285,000 people. Eighty percent are first-generation college students; 55% receive some financial aid. Student body of 1,800, about 275 will graduate, one-third of this number will transfer to a four-year institution.

I have always been puzzled that our Founding Fathers did not include education as a basic right in

our Constitution. Of course, I realize that during the 19th Century, education was a privilege for the few, and whatever schools existed were sponsored by charity. The revolutionary change which has occurred over the last 200 years in attitude and value judgment is most impressive. Today, individuals, states and the federal government contribute hundreds of billions of dollars per year to education, and a college degree is regarded as a mandatory entrance permit to life in an industrialized society.

The community college is the first step in this process and perhaps the most vital: the pragmatic

approach to education persuades many to continue their training beyond high school, and this re-acquaintance with academic life will induce a large number of students to pursue their learning process in other institutions of higher education. The number of transfer students is increasing, and in most universities today amount to more than ten percent of the undergraduate population. The trend toward continued education is accelerating.

Are our educational institutions prepared to satisfy this demand? Will curricula be adapted to take account of differing personal as well as national priorities?

And finally, are we willing to pay for a product,

education, which becomes increasingly more expensive in relation to anticipated returns? Let me briefly address myself to these problems.

### The Role of Education

Whenever education is critically treated, whether in funding, planning or in appreciation, it often rests upon a lack of understanding that the educational process is an integral part of society.

The fortunes and ills of this nation will affect content and form of education. It is a reciprocal relationship. The problems of education cannot be solved in isolation.

They should be the concern of students, faculty and administrators just as much as they should be for those of you who are leaving the institution today.

You and your children, as well as the community at large, will continue to depend upon the fruits of education. Such an interdependence between college and society is obvious; it is a link that must be sustained. But our obligation goes even further: When we argue for universal access to education, it implies also a universal responsibility for its survival. So let us always remember: What ails the nation, will also ail education.

## Fiscal Restraint

The economic malaise of this country is seriously affecting our institutions of higher learning. Colleges today are faced with spiralling costs and prohibitive deficits. As a labor-intensive industry, higher education spends as much as 80% of a college budget on salaries. Over the last decade, the cost of higher education increased 15% faster than the cost-of-living index. In an annual survey of the College Entrance Examination Board, it is estimated that college costs will rise, in 1979, above our inflation level. The national average cost per student

in a public, two-year college is \$2,612 while the total cost for a student in some of our private universities will, for the first time, exceed \$9,000. As a consequence of these fiscal developments, one out of every ten colleges may be forced to close down over the next ten years. Others will have to merge or consolidate their operations.

This is a devastating picture which calls for radical surgery. What are our options? One, of course, is to cut salaries of administrators and faculty, a method currently being considered by a number of state legislatures. Such cuts may be

indirect by making annual increments lower than the inflation rate. Generally, this solution has inherent disadvantages, particularly when singling out one profession to pay for the damages caused by inflation and recession. While many other sectors of the economy still register handsome profits, educators will have to search for supplementary income, which inevitably will affect the quality of teaching and the volume of research that benefits society as a whole.

Another alternative would be increased public funding. Judging by the mood of the Congress, which

is also reflected in the state capitals, any educational revenue expansion is unlikely to come from public subsidies. Nevertheless, financial aid funds to students from all sources will exceed \$12.3 billion in 1979-80. The Middle Income Student Assistance Act which the Congress past last fall, guarantees loans to students in any income category. The formula for basic educational opportunity grants has also been liberalized by raising family income limits from \$15,000 to \$25,000. Tuition increases may be necessary, but can be counter-productive by having an adverse effect upon enrollment.

A third approach for dealing with the tight financial situation in colleges would be to improve productivity. But productivity is more easily defined as an industrial model involving machines rather than human beings. Nevertheless, this area appears to be the most likely in which to achieve greater cost efficiency. The student-teacher ratio must be improved by eliminating courses which have ceased to attract students. Faculty course loads can be judiciously expanded without a detrimental effect upon educational quality, student counseling or institutional governance. Most likely, there is also room on any

campus for improving administrative procedures and management in general, and for reducing bureaucratic overhead. Educators teach industry the advantages of a cost-benefit ratio; why not apply it to an educational institution? In these times of hard fiscal constraints, business as usual must give way to unusual business.

### Enrollment Stagnation

The lifeblood of our colleges, the very rationale for their existence, is the student. Between 1960 and 1970, enrollments more than doubled. This led to

drastic material expansion in the number of faculty, facilities and services. Consequently, the share of the Gross National Product going into higher education rose from 1.1% to 2.2%. We are now told that the traditional student population will stagnate in number and, after 1980, decline. Our objective of zero-population growth will affect university attendance. Consequently, higher education will have to constrict its facilities and services; educational planning will have to emphasize quality over quantity.

The possibility of losing students has led to

intra-institutional competition. If this should bring about the elimination of some stale traditions and a stricter functional performance, it can only be applauded. I am talking here about some imbalances which need rectifying. For instance, 58% of all undergraduates are majoring in professional programs, but only 37% of the faculty teach in these subjects. The situation is the reverse in the humanities in which 9% of the undergraduates major but with 19% of the teaching faculty.

But inward-directed remedies should be matched by efforts to attract the potential student. Through

its programs and through its demonstration of being a living, caring institution, a college should challenge the hitherto uninitiated, adults and part-time students alike. The unemployed can be motivated to spend their time in the classroom; the mother and housewife can be induced to participate and even the businessman can be attracted to supplement his technical skills with further professional training. In Connecticut, for example, the brothers, sisters and parents of present students can enroll for half the tuition. In Washington State, freshmen can pay their entire tuition and fees at the beginning of their college

career and will then be protected against any further increases. Our national goal should be a life-long education for all, or in the words of Plato, "When the wheel of education has once been set in motion, the speed is always increasing ..."

### Quantification of Education

Closely related to the two problems which I just mentioned, financial restraint and a preoccupation with enrollment, is a third critical area, namely quantification of education at the expense of quality. We have been increasingly concerned, and correctly

so, with the administrative and technical aspects of higher education but in the process tend to lose sight of its ultimate objectives. The danger of such a quantitative approach is to see as its prime aim the need to handle as many students as possible in a minimum amount of time without regard for their suitability for study or the later demands for their talents on the labor market.

Parallel to this development has been an attitudinal change among students themselves. No longer do many seek education for the sake of education. The priority today is clearly to be trained for a specific

task. Consequently, there appears to be an eagerness to obtain good grades even if it should detract from the mere pleasures of an intellectual indulgence.

Courses are frequently chosen not for enrichment but for minimum work and easy grading. Languages and other subjects in the liberal arts, if not an absolute career requirement, will be shunned. The relaxed educational pace of yesteryear has been replaced by the urgency of attaining employment. But in this time of scarce jobs, would it not be preferable to continue one's study? Would it not decrease the competitive aspects later if an advanced degree is

obtained now? And finally, does job promotion ultimately not depend upon a broad educational foundation rather than specific skills, an outlook which encourages human relations rather than the equation of an account?

However, in all fairness, it is not only the student who has been affected in his attitude by this secularization process which places material goals over educational objectives. Reports from campuses indicate a widespread conflict generated by lack of dollars and students. There appears to be much more

friction in hiring, the granting of tenure and faculty advancement. The allocation of funds is today much more scrutinized than ever before. Even the distribution of authority, the input functions of faculty, departments and the administration, are subject to challenge. Such active interest can be invigorating as long as it does not change the order of priorities, the foremost of which is to provide a sound education.

Needed: A Motivation of Education

Although it is useful to examine where higher education stands today, we must look into the future

while being receptive to change and flexibility. We cannot continue the well-trodden paths of the past only because they met with adequate success. Educational programs must remain innovative, and educational methods challenging.

In the final analysis, education will be what we want it to be; we will derive its benefits in the same measure as we contribute toward it. But the educational process must be more than the mechanical response to learned stimuli. It requires motivation, goals and convictions. The capacity to have visions

worth serving made us all endure these long years in college. When you leave this institution today, with my congratulations for your achievement, and my good wishes for your future, I would like you to remember that education is a never-ending process. You will remain associated with the ideals which you found at this institution, and you will build upon them. But never lose your critical faculty or an inquiring mind. They are essential for our way of life.