



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

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State Council of Higher Education
To the Virginia YMCA
1998 Model Executive Government Conference

“IF YOU RAN THE ZOO”

State Capital
Richmond, Virginia
November 9, 1998
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Good morning. Welcome to Richmond and to the neighborhood where I now work. My office is just around the corner from here – in the James Monroe Building. I’m curious to see how many of you live here in Richmond? How many others have visited here previously? I hope your conference schedule permits time for you to see some of the city. As someone who has just recently moved here, I’m still getting to know my way around and to discover all the fun, interesting, and historical opportunities that Richmond has to offer. But, I’ve already concluded that it’s a wonderful place to live and to work. I hope you enjoy your brief visit.

While preparing to participate in this Model Executive Government Conference, I was reminded of a description I recently read of various computer viruses. I want to share a few of them with you, since they illustrate the very opposite of “model” government:

First, we want to beware of the “Federal Bureaucrat Virus.” It divides your hard disk into hundreds of little units, each of which does practically nothing, but all of which claim to be the most important part of your computer. With due respect to Alan Greenspan, we also want to guard against the “Government Economist Virus.” Once you’ve been invaded by that one, nothing on your computer works, but all your diagnostic soft-

ware says everything is fine. And most deadly of all – we want to avoid the “Federal Government Virus,” which causes your computer to lock up, splits your screen in half, and throws up a message on each side of the screen blaming the other half for the problem. Fortunately, these viruses are spawned only at the level of federal government and have nothing to do with state government.

You have a marvelous opportunity today and tomorrow to consider what you think state and federal government should do about higher education. When my son and daughter were young, I used to read to them a wonderful book by Dr. Seuss called *If I ran the Zoo*. Perhaps some of you have also read it. In this story, the small boy Gerald McGrew relates the changes he’d make if he ran the zoo. I invite you to be as boldly imaginative as young McGrew in considering how you would change higher education if you ran the zoo. Better still, I hope you’ll consider throughout the conference how you would design Virginia’s system of higher education from the ground up if it did not already exist.

I think there are a number of fundamental questions you would want to keep in mind while creating a system of higher education. As we talk about these questions, I’d suggest that you consider each of them from three perspectives:

1. How do your answers to these questions affect the proposals about higher education that you will develop this afternoon and evening?
2. How might the answers to these questions affect your own, personal decisions about which college to attend, and how to spend your time while in college?
3. When the time comes for you to run the real zoo – as a worker, teacher, civic leader, business owner, or parent and as an active citizen – how might these answers affect your actions and votes?

Here, then, are the questions I hope we can talk about in the short time we have left before lunch:

1. What is the purpose of a college education?
2. Who should pay the cost for a college education?
3. How should we evaluate whether colleges and universities are doing a good job?

The purpose of a college education

Let’s start, then, by talking about the purposes of a college education. Why do you plan to go to college? *Can someone give me a brief statement on that?*

If you said that you plan to go to college because it will help you get a good job, then you share the opinion of most college freshman. The UCLA Higher Education Research Institute surveys entering college freshmen each year. One finding of the survey

is that more and more students each year say that they chose to attend college mainly because doing so will improve their career options and lifetime earnings. A college degree can definitely pay off financially. Someone who earns a bachelor's degree will, on average, earn about \$18,000 more each year than someone whose formal education ends with a high school diploma.¹

What are other reasons for attending college? *Some one else?* Most of us view a college education as more than just a meal ticket. We expect that we will gain substantial knowledge and learn new skills. A major education reformer, who designed much of the undergraduate curriculum at the University of Chicago earlier in this century – Mortimer Adler – described three types of learning we should expect from a college education:

- 1) the acquisition of organized knowledge in such fields as language, literature, and the arts; mathematics and natural sciences; and, history, geography, and the study of social institutions;
- 2) the development of intellectual skills, all of which are skills of learning and thinking; and,
- 3) the enhancement of the understanding of basic ideas and values.

Deciding what to teach and what courses students should be required to take are important questions that have been hotly debated at faculty meetings and in published writings for as long as we have had colleges. This fall, the Council of Higher Education has just completed a survey that asked each of Virginia's colleges and universities to complete a survey on their general education program. General education describes the part of a college curriculum that develops one's general knowledge and skills, as opposed to courses in one's major. When we issue our report on the survey results, it will provide a current, comprehensive overview of a major part of what Virginia college students are being asked to learn. You may want to spend time in your discussions this afternoon talking about what types of courses you would require students to take if you could design the program.

Now, however, I'd like instead to ask you why you should acquire this knowledge – other than its relevance to your careers. What is in it for you personally? And, how might society as a whole benefit from your college education? *Who will go first?*

There are many possible ways to talk about the difference that a college education can make in your own lives and in the well being of our society. If you read the mission statement that is usually published in every college's catalog, you will see how varied the descriptions can be. But, I think you will find these four recurring themes:

1. Lifelong learning;
2. Developing an educated citizenry;
3. Transmitting and adding to our intellectual and cultural heritage; and,

4. Understanding oneself and the world.

Life-long learning

The importance of life-long learning is talked about much more now than it was when I went to college, but the fact is that a universal characteristic of a truly educated person has always been this: Those who are truly educated are able to recognize when they do not know or understand something and they know how to take the necessary steps to learn what they need to know. We too often overlook that the first step toward wisdom is acknowledging our ignorance.

Much is written today about job-related aspects of life-long learning. People change jobs, and even careers, more often today than was true a few decades ago. Even if you stay in the same job, the skills you need to do the job will change over time. Now, more than ever, you should demand that your college education teach you to be a self-reliant learner. But those who profit most from their college education understand that a tenacity for learning does not just improve our work lives. Rather, it can inform and enhance all aspects of our lives. The best education nurtures within us not just the capacity for learning, but a deep, abiding love of learning for its own sake.

Developing an educated citizenry

Moving to the second theme – developing an educated citizenry – I want to ask this question: What do you see as the connection between education and democracy? *Can someone respond to that?*

The shape and character of American education, including higher education evolved gradually since the time of the Jamestown settlement. Even so, the conception of education as a central, vital component of our democracy was clear to those who founded this nation. This connection infuses Thomas Jefferson’s writings, but other founders shared his belief that a system of self-government – as opposed to a monarchy – must be based upon the ability of individuals to govern themselves as individuals and as nation. We should ask ourselves, however, whether human nature is such that we can rely on such a premise.

Consider this excerpt from essay no. 51 in *The Federalist Papers*:

. . . what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.

Those who founded this nation understood that people are not angels. They realized that we enter this life imperfect in nature. One of our life pursuits is that of perfecting our understanding and our actions. And, one of our chief means to support us in that pursuit is education.

Jefferson and his compatriots believed that we have a natural right to govern ourselves. But having the right is not the same as having the ability. He saw education as democracy’s guarantor. And, as we know, one of the lifetime accomplishments he chose to have recorded on his tombstone was the founding of the University of Virginia.

In several important ways, our democracy is only one generation deep. Each generation must recreate for itself an understanding of the “Blessings of Liberty” that are mentioned in the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution. Each generation must make its own commitment to securing these blessings for ourselves and our posterity. The low voter turnout in last week’s elections – just 25 percent here in Virginia – is a troubling sign of how little invested in our democracy people feel these days. I would argue that we have a civic and moral obligation to design and implement an education system that causes each generation to engage in the study and reflection needed to make democracy work. Nor can they enjoy or benefit from liberty unless their souls first grow into able agents. They must grow to govern themselves, to attain such moral command of themselves as to be at liberty to structure their lives in accord with the “Blessings of Liberty.”

Transmitting our intellectual and cultural heritage

Just as democracy is but one generation deep, the same can be said of our intellectual and cultural understandings if they are not handed along from one generation to the next. In one of the most famous statements ever made about the purpose of higher education, Matthew Arnold described a college education as the opportunity to learn about the best that has been thought and written in the world.

What we need to understand about this value of a college education is that this transmission of our intellectual and cultural heritage from one generation to the next is not done passively. Each generation recreates its own understanding of this heritage and adds to it.

Understanding oneself and the world

Have you heard the saying, “Know thyself?” Where does this saying come from? *Who would like to respond to that question?* It was uttered by the Delphic oracle, the most famous oracle in ancient Greece. But what does it mean? One of the difficulties of going to the Delphic oracle for answers to one’s questions about life is that the answers were often obscure and difficult to understand. Often, the meaning would only become clear years later.

It may be that this notion of understanding oneself – and the role that a college education can play in enlarging that understanding – is one that we cannot appreciate fully until our own later years. Gaining self-understanding and understanding of the world is a life-long undertaking. But, a college education doesn't amount to a hill of beans unless it gives you the power to look at yourself with a penetrating, critical eye, to understand why you stand where you stand and why you do what you do. One of the greatest victories that you acquire with education is the capacity to see beyond the ground upon which you stand, to comprehend that ground within your vision, and to recognize your own prejudices and point of view.

I'd like to hear what you think about the notion that one role of college – in fact, I would say the most important role of college – is to help us understand ourselves and the world. Is this also a role of high school education? How would you go about designing an education system that numbers the attainment of self-knowledge among its goals for student learning? *Who wants to start the discussion of these questions?*

Who should pay for a college education?

Now that we've spent some time discussing the purpose of a college education, let's consider who should bear the cost. I suspect that the speakers who talked with you earlier this morning spoke about a variety of issues having to do with the cost of a college education. As the background materials that you received for this conference described, there are two major committees in place right now that are looking at the cost of college – the Governor's Blue Ribbon Committee and the Legislative Joint Subcommittee on Higher Education Funding Policies.

There are many, complex aspects to the broad topic of the cost of higher education and I hope the proposals that you develop this afternoon and evening will tackle a variety of those aspects. But for our discussion right now, I'd like to focus on the question of who should pay the cost, and why.

What do you think the options are?

There are basically four options:

1. The individual students and their families could pay the entire cost;
2. The government (local, state, or federal) could pay the entire cost;
3. Private charity might pay the cost; or,
4. The cost could be paid through a combination of the above.

What arguments would you make in support of each of those options?

In the United States, we have – over time – developed a complex version of option number four, haven’t we? Most students find that they pay part of the cost, that they receive some financial aid (which may come from state funds, federal funds, or from a corporate or individual donation to the college), and if they attend a public college or university, a significant portion of the cost of their education is paid for by the state taxpayers.

This combined approach reflects our belief that some of the benefits from a college education accrue directly to the individual – so that students should generally pay some of the cost – and that some of the benefits accrue to society at large – so some of the cost should be paid through taxes or other means of public support. More specifically, we recognize – at least implicitly – that without public support, too few individuals would choose to go to college for society to get the amount of benefit we seek from having a well-educated populace.

But, once we agree that a combined funding approach makes sense, we are still left with the question of who should pay how much, aren’t we? The funding split between tax support and tuition support within Virginia has varied a lot over the past fifty years. About twenty years ago (in 1976), the General Assembly adopted a policy that the state would assume 70 percent of the cost of education and that the students would pay the remaining 30 percent. This plan was phased in over six years because tuition rates varied greatly among the four-year public institutions. But, with the economic downturn that Virginia and many other states experienced near the end of the 1980s, that ratio broke down.

One of the important questions that is being considered at present by the Council and by the two committees I mentioned is what sort of funding policy will best serve the citizens of the Commonwealth today.

What would you recommend?

How should we evaluate whether colleges and universities are doing a good job?

The final question I want to raise with you this morning is: “How should we evaluate whether colleges and universities are doing a good job?” I actually want to ask you two questions in this regard. First, what mechanisms are we using right now to determine whether our colleges and universities are doing well the job we’ve asked them to do? Second, if you ran the zoo, what mechanisms would you put in place to evaluate the performance of higher education?

We don’t really have enough time left for a complete discussion of this complex topic. So, I will leave you with these thoughts: If one of the most important purposes of a college education is to help us grow in our understanding of our selves and the world, how could we reasonably evaluate whether that growth happens – especially since it is

growth that we expect to continue throughout our lives? Further, how would we know whether the college we attended really caused, or aided, that growth? Certainly there are other experiences in addition to going to college that promote our growth. And yet, we would surely want to judge the performance of a college based on how well it carries out its most important purpose, rather than limit our assessment to how well it carries out less important purposes – wouldn't we?

It's no easy business to run the zoo. But, the fact that some questions lack easy answers does not diminish the importance of the questions or the need for us to ponder them. I want to thank you for joining me this morning in tugging at some very tough, very basic, and very important questions. I hope you'll keep on looking for answers throughout this conference, throughout your college years, and throughout your lives. And, I trust you will make some big changes when it's your turn to run the zoo.

ⁱ The June 1998 issue of Postsecondary Education Opportunity reports the following average annual income figures for 1996: \$20,874 for individuals with a high school education only; \$37,970 for individuals who have earned a bachelor's degree.