



ST JOHN'S
College

ANNAPOLIS · SANTA FE

OFFICE OF THE
PRESIDENT

P.O. Box 2800
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND
21404

410-626-2510
FAX 410-295-6937
www.stjohnscollege.edu

Expectations of a New Administration

Opening Address at Annual Meeting of the Council on Higher Education Accreditation
Christopher B. Nelson, President, St. John's College, Annapolis, Maryland
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Good Evening! I confess to feeling like an imposter, standing before you to address the expectations of our new Administration. I doubt that I know more than any of you here, and considerably less than some of you, about what we in higher education may expect from an Obama administration. We have heard the merest outline and received some hopeful signals relative to access and affordability and some of the financial concerns we share: a hope for an increase in the Pell Grant and for funds from an economic stimulus package to support capital construction that may benefit some of our institutions.

But as the title to this talk contains a bit of ambiguity, I thought I might address some of what we would hope to expect of this administration. As this gathering is concerned largely with matters pertinent to accreditation, I'll limit my comments to the things we care most about as they affect the heart of our endeavors in the education of our students, those things that go to institutional purpose, mission and autonomy in the face of reasonable demands for some public accountability over the expenditure of federal money that comes to us, largely through federal grant and loan programs. I will say nothing more about our expectations or hopes for financial support of any kind, in an effort to help us think about first things: our reasons for being (which are not to make money), our missions and purposes, our proper debt to the common weal, and our case that we (public and independent institutions alike) must, and do indeed, serve the public good.

Let me state in a nutshell what I believe the public policy of this nation ought to be with respect to the education of our young, and what it ought to rest upon. I'll elaborate on this later and ask us how we are responding to this characterization of appropriate public policy:

Our nation's foundation rests upon the principle of intellectual freedom of each of its citizens; its political, economic, moral and spiritual freedoms are all derived from this intellectual freedom, and its political, economic, moral and spiritual strength depends upon it. We are nation built upon a respect for the individual and a trust that our citizens are capable of self-government.

For the sake of our country, we therefore need our citizens to have an education in our democratic traditions and foundations, as well as in the arts needed to question and examine those very foundations so that we may keep them vibrant and alive for us against attack or atrophy. There is a real tension between these two goods. The traditions, customs and laws of the nation are at times at odds with the very things that encourage autonomy of the individual citizen. This tension is healthy in a free republic.

An education that will strengthen this tension will serve this nation well, whether at the primary and secondary level or at the collegiate level. It

means providing the access and opportunity to as many as possible to undertake such an education.

If we prize the individual in our society and value the ways an individual may become self-sufficient, we also ought to support the many and various means our colleges employ to help their students become self-sufficient. In the end, the independence and self-sufficiency of our citizenry will strengthen our nation. Education in the arts of freedom and self-sufficiency make the promise of America possible.

You will note that I have not stated that a first principle of public policy ought to be global competitiveness in the marketplace, or financial supremacy, or military superiority, or international leadership in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. These things will follow upon any sound investment in the broader public policy I have mentioned. They are all good things, but they require that we acknowledge first the source of our historic strength in these areas, and that this strength comes from the education of Americans in the arts of freedom and self-sufficiency which are prior to an education in work force specialties. We already know that our new president is a man deeply rooted in our nation's foundations and its underlying principles, and that a public policy grounded in those foundations in freedom may reasonably be expected of this administration. We could hope that he might use the presidential pulpit to encourage our colleges and universities as well as our primary and secondary schools to help Americans recall the importance of our roots in freedom, and consider these as a foundation for an educational program.

As there are many ways one might achieve such freedom and self-sufficiency, and as we are a nation of experimenters, always seeking better ways to achieve our ends, we ought to encourage and promote independence in our institutions of learning to find a variety of ways to help a hugely diverse citizenry to find its way to such independence and success.

I can conceive of no better way to strengthen and encourage our many schools of higher learning to provide such an education than to support a system of accreditation that depends on a careful institutional self-study and thoughtful peer review of a school's educational program in the context of its own statement of purposes, or its "mission."

Consider the self-study. In every case I know, this means that we are starting with a statement of high aspirations, not of minimal, baseline measures of quality, some lowest common denominator for accreditation purposes. The distinction is important, because the accrediting bodies ask us to assess how we are doing against our aspirations before they ask whether we meet minimum standards. This gives colleges permission to be self-critical and freedom to explore ways of improving themselves. If we want our colleges to soar, we ought to give them the means and opportunity to fulfill their dreams, not have them ranked according to some common accounting standard to measure whether those dreams and aspirations best serve the global economy.

My biggest problem with so many of the recommendations we've heard in recent years for improving the assessment of the education that is going on in our colleges is that they ask far too little of us, and much, much less than our existing peer-review process does now. The former would frequently reduce assessment to a process of counting; our peer-review process allows for the exercise of judgment and responsibility, a far more complex and healthy way of determining whether we are doing what we say we intend to do in our statements of purposes.

It seems that everywhere we turn these days, we hear the call for more tests to measure the quality of our efforts to teach what someone out there thinks ought to suit our institutional purposes. Here's the

response I give to those who would try to force my college into a framework that is ill-suited to our purposes. It is the case for liberal education, for the importance of what goes on in the classroom, and for institutional autonomy in determining this. It is the case I make to our friends, our board, our faculty, our students and staff. Granted, I speak for a liberal arts college, one even that has an all-required curriculum for all of its students. But I think these principles ought to serve both public and independent colleges who have given thought and care to what they are trying to achieve in the classroom and on the campus:

What we teach is important; curriculum matters. We should give our students material that will give them practice at thinking, rather than pretend we can teach them how to think. Whenever we see colleges having a vigorous conversation about the content of curriculum we should be heartened; it means that something is still at stake for students and faculty alike. We have a responsibility to our students to help them see that some things are more worthy of study than others, that we are not just shopping malls, but that we exercise judgment in our curricular offerings.

We should promote the desire to learn over the mania to test performance; success in passing tests will follow the former as night does the day. Therefore, we should construct academic programs that encourage the desire to learn for its own sake rather than for the sake of the grade. This requires that we give attention both to the quality of the materials we use to teach from and our ways of giving them life in the classroom. What we want most is to banish the blight of higher education: the passivity of the classroom. We should be giving our students matter that will be worthy of their love. After all, it is love that moves us to the good in this world, including all the good that can be learned. It is also love that frees us to seek to learn for its own sake. We want to encourage this freedom in our students because our future depends on a populace of free men and women who are not slaves to convention, popular opinion, or the rule book. National comparability studies of test results are only likely to constrain colleges to think more about their test scores and rankings among peer schools and less about their students. Thus, as a matter of public policy, we should abandon recent efforts to measure some common standard across our schools (invariably a low standard), and instead encourage us to find ways to measure progress against our own particular institutional goals.

We should abandon the language of the marketplace. We are not delivery systems; students are not consumers; and education is not a product that can be bought and sold. The familiar metaphors of our commercial world come easily to all of us. For that reason alone, we should be wary of slipping into such talk; we may come to forget that learning is a cooperative activity, requiring commitment and effort on the part of the student, a far more complicated interaction than the purchase of goods at the shopping mall. Diplomas are not bought and sold; they are earned.

We should own up to our commitment to serving the interest of the individual soul. Our duty is to the health of the individual. A strong individual will be a good citizen.

Our colleges serve the public good. We do this by helping to bring thoughtful adults into the world — adults who are free to think for themselves, and free to choose paths of action they consider to be best rather than those that are easiest or most popular.

That's my argument, and I'm sticking to it.

I understand that Secretary Spellings, before leaving office, called upon the establishment of five teams to engage in a Negotiated Rulemaking in five general areas of concern, one of which is the reform of

accreditation. If these teams are formed and the rulemaking proceeds (and I'm not sure that this is a good idea), I hope that our colleges and universities will promote the virtues of independence, acknowledge the need for accountability with respect to our own distinctive missions and purposes, and seek the support of this new administration to allow us each to articulate our purposes before holding us to them.

Our nation's young people not only deserve access to affordable higher education; they deserve choice in the means to acquire it and choice in the particular ends they seek to achieve the self-sufficiency each of them deserves. Institutional leadership is required to make this goal both credible and achievable. This Administration's encouragement of us in our highest hopes and aspirations will serve this nation and its youth far better than any stamp of regulation could possibly achieve. What it means to live a good life ought always to be a question for each of our students, and it ought also to be an aspiration of ours to have them confront this question. To have some governmental entity try to answer it for us and close the doors kept open by inquiry would be like shutting us into a cave, from which we have dimming hopes of escape. We have been facing such dark times in recent years.

If this Administration wishes to seek change to improve the quality of education in this country, I would encourage it to abandon efforts at more governmental regulation of so-called student 'outcomes' and institutional comparability measures, and to embrace the principles of freedom and self-sufficiency as worthy aspirations of our young, so that they may face the world with the spirit required to meet its many and changing challenges, the spirit that says "Yes, we can!" meet those challenges. I would call on all of us who defend the need for institutional autonomy to also acknowledge that "Yes, we can" do better in achieving our purposes and improving ourselves, while still being accountable to our students and their families for what we say we are trying to achieve in our schools --- without the strong arm of the law telling us what our purposes ought to be.

As a matter of public and institutional policy, we should be concerned with two principle aims, and I am happy to see that these are consistent with the efforts of our leadership in CHEA. I am a fan of the CHEA Initiative and congratulate you for it. (Judith Eaton has been a champion for us here in Washington!):

First, we need to strengthen public confidence and trust in self-regulation. This is the job of our institutions. This will require a greater level of transparency in showing our publics what we are seeking to achieve at our schools, what kind of learning experience we are seeking to provide to our students, and then explaining how we go about meeting these self-established expectations.

Second, we need the government to refocus its oversight of higher education to leave to our accrediting agencies the setting of academic standards --- the standards for student achievement, faculty qualifications, and curricular requirements. We need to see NACIQI (The National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity) concentrate on accountability with respect to the use of federal funds, institutional viability, and the problematic abusers out there who use fraudulent credentials and serve as nothing more than empty diploma mills. Why not even leave to CHEA the function of determining who ought to be performing the accrediting function?

It is very hard to know just exactly what are the things that have most led to the loss of confidence in some quarters in the ability of higher education to set its own standards and to live by them, but I suspect it is that it's becoming harder and harder for people to discover whether our colleges and universities have any standards at all. This mistrust, which is justified only in part, is the greatest danger we face, and I think it is related to the degradation of the liberal arts.

I mean here not to denigrate the need for, and good of, specialization and knowledge of the particular. What I worry about is the loss of attention to those big questions at the heart of liberal learning: what does it mean to be human? What is my place in the world? How ought I to live my life? They are fundamentally human questions and they recognize that we are whole beings. They invite us to ask in what sense we are collections of molecules and products of our genes, descendants of apes or children of god, thinking beings and lovers of wisdom, acquisitive animals and worshipers of pleasure, political animals with rights and duties, moral beings with obligations to ourselves and others, or spiritual beings with souls that answer to a higher authority.

The human mind, like the human being, is not compartmentalized into humanities, arts and sciences, nor into specialties either. We may have left and right sides of the brain, but we think with a whole mind. We should have concern for the humanities. The “humanities”, properly conceived, is about the whole human project, and it crosses all those artificial, disciplinary boundaries, including mathematics, the sciences and the arts. The work of our colleges and universities ought to recognize the whole of their study and not just the parts. Our students should be asking what it means to be human in all of its many forms and should be studying both the whole and its parts for some period of their undergraduate education, before they pursue a necessary area of special concern requiring special expertise. Where is this happening, and when should it happen? Before or during college? These questions belong to us in this room. We should take some responsibility for seeing that these deeply human questions have a place somewhere in our classrooms, on our campuses or in the secondary schools before they arrive at our colleges. Showing the public that we are taking some responsibility in these matters, as well as in workforce training, may help to restore some of the confidence necessary for us to do best what we are called to do, to help all of our students have an education that is fit for the freedom they enjoy in this great nation of ours.

The professionalization of liberal learning has caused too many of us to forget the good of learning for its own sake --- the joy of discovering new things simply because one is trying to find an answer to a question that he or she wants answered, one in which the student has a stake because the question belongs to the student rather than to the teacher. I know that we require professional skills to handle professional jobs, but that should not become a limitation upon our desire to explore widely before we seek a disciplinary focus.

There is much at the heart of our work with our students that needs attention. Almost all of it belongs to our institutions. Let us take up these tasks with seriousness of purpose, and address them each in our own ways. As for public policy, we ask for an appropriate delineation of responsibilities allowing the government and our educational institutions each a proper and defined scope of responsibility. We need to acknowledge where the proper place is for accountability to the government, while undertaking for ourselves what belongs to us – the content of curriculum and the conduct of the classroom.