

# Higher Ground for Higher Education

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*The voice of experience reflects the personal views of the author, shared to provoke national conversation among NSEE members and other professional educators. David Sawyer is Director of Students for Appalachia at Berea College.*

I believe that higher education should address itself equally to two great goals—the happiness of the individual and the health of the society. One wonders if American higher education is doing either very well.

Something seems fundamentally amiss about the way we prepare young people for contemporary adult lives. Our teaching methods promote passivity and even glorify the distinction between thought and action. What an odd way to educate young people in a democracy, which flourishes only when profound values are translated into active citizenship. Are we generating the truly alert and educated citizenry that is the foundation of a free society? One hardly needs to be reminded of such serious symptoms of democratic decline as the lack of nuance in comprehending current issues and of our consistently poor voter turnout.

Far greater dangers are visible on the horizon of the human race. The Worldwatch Institute's 1989 State of the World report says that *"the looming threats we now face...have so much momentum that unless action begins now to reverse them, they will inevitably lead to paralyzing, costly economic consequences and the collapse of social and political institutions"*. Worldwatch concludes that the nineties must be *"the turnaround decade"*.

Our Common Future, a similar report released in 1987 that was commissioned by the United Nations, calls for massive changes worldwide and says *"We are unanimous in our conviction that the security, well-being, and very survival of the planet depend on such changes, now."* Such hopeful changes, the report states, will depend upon *"vast campaigns of education, debate, and public participation."*

This is science speaking, and this is serious. Higher education needs to be reminded of the greater context in which it exists. That context includes not only democracy and world community, but the Earth itself. If the *very survival* of the human race and of our planetary system depends on *vast campaigns of public participation*, what role do *you* think higher education needs to play in the coming decades?

Why shouldn't colleges and universities become key actors in the global arena? Isn't it our responsibility to prepare graduates for more than private careers and abstract futures of self-fulfillment? Can you imagine the excitement on campus if an entire institution—faculty, staff, and students—took on local or global problems and set about solving them? This is the kind of shared experience that could restore that missing sense of community in higher education. When all hands unite in common work, common unity, comm-unity, is established. Indeed, to teach civic virtue and active participation to students, we in higher education must ourselves practice it.

The second great goal of education, the development of the inner person, must always complement preparation for citizenship. In this regard we have more to attend to than ever before, as counselors and remedial educators will attest. The character-shaping power of family and community continues to decline, and America remains in the grip of a strange, TV passivity, watching rather than participating in events. The Berlin Wall falls, the world presses into high gear, and we applaud from our armchairs, politely.

In an earlier day the demands of rural life and of smaller cohesive communities shaped habits of service and responsibility and provided plenty of “experiential education”. Today, for better or worse, our education system from pre-school on must supplement what the family and community have traditionally done and prepare people for *life*, not just for careers. Developing habits of work, discipline, and service in addition to knowledge, learning, and logic are sensible, necessary objectives. Education must not only pour information in—it must pull character out.

In short, I believe that we need to rethink and redefine the basic purposes of higher education. To do that we must ponder the greater environment in which our institutions exist, and acknowledge a global context that has never been more challenging or complex. Isn't it obvious that we need a new generation of young people who are profoundly involved in democracy and global affairs? Isn't it high time that service learning and experiential education were recognized as valid ways of learning and teaching? It is clear that in these lively educational exchanges, interest and information collide, values are formed, and action emerges.

George Keller, Professor of Higher Education at the University of Pennsylvania, states that 80 – 90% of the change in higher education is precipitated by outside forces. If he is correct, then the evolution of our institutions may well be out of our hands. But I am attracted to the idea that thoughtful educators and administrators, at this crucial passage in history, will seize the initiative and commit our institutions to the “good work” that redeems humankind.

Marshall McLuhan said it well 20 years ago: “*There are no passengers on Spaceship Earth, we are all crew.*”