

Higher Education: Purpose and Promise in a Changing Society

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I am very pleased to be here, particularly representing the W.K. Kellogg Foundation on this occasion. In preparing to speak with you, I realized that the value of “lifelong education” has seldom held more personal significance than in recent months. Moving from the world of academe to the world of philanthropy, I have once again become the student. My assignments have been to learn the foundation’s work in greater detail, to grasp the strategic direction and scope of its mission, and to get to know its grantees and initiatives. But as, I hope, a good student, I also have sought to know its history and origins — to learn how it took root and how it has since grown — so I may better appreciate the fruits it bears today.

Michigan State University’s achievements in continuing education in the past five years are a credit to the commitment of many. But they are also a testament to the vision of one man a long time ago. In 1930, W.K. Kellogg articulated a principle that has guided — and continues to guide — the foundation that bears his name. He said simply: “Education offers the greatest opportunity for really improving one generation over another.” The work of the Kellogg Foundation — here at MSU and elsewhere — brings Mr. Kellogg’s belief to life. Within just a few generations since 1930 the world has changed a great deal. But the validity of Mr. Kellogg’s statement has, perhaps, never been more compelling than it is today.

Our society is witness to change on a scale — and at a pace — that seems, at times, both hard to comprehend, and difficult to integrate. Technological advances in every field seem to make the world smaller, more accessible — within reach of every laptop or lab, however remote the locale. Gene mapping, designer drugs, and advanced surgical techniques promise a future in which the mysteries of our physical beings will be unraveled and our understanding of the sources of pain, disease, and disability greatly improved. The borders and boundaries of our changing world are dissolving, too, as the “global economy” only written of in decades past becomes one fluid, fast-moving marketplace.

But, as we are pulled toward “enlightenment” by this powerful current of change, the undertow of such vast social and economic movement makes the world more baffling and unpredictable at the same time. While we can fax a note to France or e-mail a colleague in Beijing, we are more mindful than ever of locking our doors, turning on our alarms, and, in some cases, arming ourselves against ... ourselves. While some of us can surf the “net” exploring distant fields, others remain afraid to explore neighborhoods in their towns and cities. And while many of us can readily believe in a future of unlimited possibilities, many more see their economic lot dwindling and their skills becoming obsolete as the world moves ahead without them. In the midst of great hope and expectation,

some would say we are more fearful of one another, more hampered by limited resources, more “at risk” than ever before.

Institutions of higher learning are, to some extent, also buffeted by the winds of such change. But many would claim that they also possess a degree of immunity to societal shifts, however broad. The organizational structure of an academic institution tends to mute the effect of even sweeping change. The processes and patterns within our departments and schools often serve to slow the pace of change. Institutions of higher learning are not traditionally the first to react to new directions in the world outside their walls. But react they do in time. You – who make tough decisions each and every day on campuses from England (Oxford) to California – know only too well that institutions of higher learning can and do respond to societal imperatives.

Certainly, today, you are making decisions in the face of diminishing resources and amid the pressure of market forces. The dynamics that move and, eventually, mold government, industry, and professionals in every field also drive your institutions. Our society is aging; our population is becoming more diverse; our technology is bounding forward. Your institutions are driven by these same realities as institutions are throughout the country. And, as the people of this nation strive to live and work in a rapidly changing environment, increasingly they turn – individually and collectively – to institutions of higher education for knowledge, for guidance, and for help.

At the present time, colleges and universities have great opportunities before them. Recognized as the institutions where knowledge is systematically created, preserved, and translated, colleges and universities are fertile sources of information for practical problem solving. The primary functions of institutions of higher education – of teaching, research, and service – uniquely qualify them to address complex issues. But the natural barriers between our institutions and the larger society stand between the problems of today and the solutions of tomorrow.

The Kellogg Foundation sees the promise in our institutions and regards colleges and universities as critical to national capacity and worldwide development. In our organization’s vision, the promise of higher education in a changing society seems very clear indeed. But our vision is enhanced by key assumptions about the purpose of higher education and the lessons learned from sixty-five years of working with institutions and the people and communities they were founded to serve.

The link between adult continuing education and our colleges and universities has long been recognized at the Kellogg Foundation. We gather tonight within the walls of one tangible reminder of that history of commitment. But there are other, smaller scale, less well-known historical markers that underscore the premises behind the Foundation’s work.

In the late 1930s, for example, one Kellogg Foundation project was to take 100 women from rural Van Buren County to Detroit for a week-long child development conference. The goal — to teach those who would nurture the next generation in one remote county about how children grow and learn — was clear. But the unintended consequences of the trip also taught some valuable lessons. My predecessors learned, for instance, that the distractions of “modern” travel by 1930s standards were not always conducive to accomplishing the goal. Many of the women attending the conference had never been far from home — some had never seen an elevator. A simple elevator ride, the story goes, produced illness, rashes, and, overall, a more memorable experience than even Mr. Kellogg might have anticipated.

Although such unintended consequences can be daunting, the Kellogg Foundation has never wavered from a commitment to transferring what is known to the people who can most benefit by its knowledge — or, as in this case, bringing the people who need it to the knowledge that can improve their lives.

What we have learned here in East Lansing in the last two days about the potential of continuing education is part of a continuum of learning that began with hands-on efforts like that long-ago trip to Detroit. In the 1940s the Kellogg Foundation supported the establishment of the MSU Extension Service; in 1951, the Kellogg Center for Continuing Education was founded. Here in Michigan, and at colleges and universities throughout the United States and abroad, the Kellogg Foundation has looked for ways to partner with institutions to extend the learning process and meet the emerging needs of society.

Continuing education — lifelong education — formalizes this practice by seeking to refocus higher education’s process of knowledge discovery, transmission, and application and steep it in the fundamental needs of people. As we are seeing at Michigan State University and will hopefully see elsewhere, integrating continuing education into an institution’s mission expands its potential and deepens its relevance to society in the process.

Land-grant colleges in particular may realize the potential of this refocusing. Their origins and track record of involvement in practical problem solving are consistent with this thrust. But, in recent decades, they have been shaped by the same influences that have shaped all academic institutions. Their walls are no less a barrier than the walls of other institutions. Today, the knowledge land-grant institutions gather and contain is not necessarily closer to community needs than that of other colleges and universities. They, like all institutions of higher learning, need to be reconnected to societal challenges to become all they are capable of being. I saw this premise played out very clearly at the Johns Hopkins University when I was there. By the time I left, half of our 16,000 students were adult, part-time, largely degree students. Most of

what they were learning was directly grounded in their needs at work and in their communities. These were midlevel minority managers, senior policy officials, computer engineers, special education teachers, pastors of black churches, and many more.

At the Kellogg Foundation we hold to a great many beliefs about education. Education, we believe, is the cornerstone of our democracy and of the global partnerships that bind us to the future. Education, we believe, takes place both inside and outside of classrooms. Education is an ongoing process — one long stream of learning from the earliest to the most advanced years. Higher education, we know, is an integral part of this lifelong continuum.

Based on what has been learned from more than six decades of working with institutions and communities, and on the beliefs that support our organization's collective efforts, the Kellogg Foundation has identified a number of "promising" approaches — methods and models to lead institutions toward the promise of higher education. Tonight let me describe three ways our experience suggests institutions of higher learning may themselves "learn" to become more responsive to the needs of the larger society.

The first of these approaches is a shift in focus and an adjustment of scope. The work of our grantees suggests that colleges and universities look beyond their campuses when developing curriculum, identifying teaching techniques, determining research directions, and setting faculty rewards. While U.S. institutions continue to attract significant numbers of "traditional," full-time undergraduate students, the number of part-time, nontraditional students is growing. And, although very different audiences, both types of students will need educational experiences to meet their particular needs and stimulate their development as lifelong learners. Curriculum development and teaching techniques must equip students with the tools they need to adapt to the dynamic social and economic climate that awaits them.

In addition to teaching, however, the emphasis on research and the structure of faculty rewards — tendencies deeply imbedded in the culture of today's institutions of higher education — must shift as well. Colleges and universities committed to a viable existence "off campus" must look to the constraints placed upon faculty on campus before lasting change can occur. If the student body and workforce needs of this country are changing, faculty and reward structures must change with them.

The second promising approach lies in extending technology and other resources to address a community's needs. Although our institutions' achievements in generating new knowledge are invaluable, our grantees' experience suggests colleges and universities must put additional energy and resources into implementing what they already know. The technology and intellectual resources that support university research, for

example, are largely untapped when it comes to solving community problems. And, although research may indicate potential solutions to problems, the critical next steps — applying what has been learned and sharing resources with the community to make problem-solving efforts successful — are often not taken. The interface between “research” and “practice” in this context is a continuing challenge.

Extending research and analysis to tackle community problems may simultaneously identify venues for student learning and new directions for scholarly research. Faculty and student development may parallel community development as the needs and resources of one set of learners become intertwined with the needs and resources of another. By extending an institution’s overall functioning through the application of learning, the multidimensional mission of scholarship, teaching, and service takes on new depth and the problems and opportunities of higher education become more closely aligned with those of society.

A third approach institutions may learn from is partnering to strengthen and extend education at multiple levels. From a pragmatic point of view, this approach may have the greatest resonance in the business and administrative offices of colleges and universities. Expanding the audiences an institution may appeal to is consistent with the financial responsibilities of those who plan for its future. Certainly, the advantages of some partnerships are recognized — if not always maximized — in institutions of higher learning. Industry, for instance, is open to opportunities to develop “just-in-time” learning to expand workforce capabilities. Alliances that take coursework into plants through the use of existing or developing technology widen the impact of the institution and meet the needs of the business community.

But other audiences may be viable partners, too. Partnerships with community organizations, community colleges, public school systems, community health centers, and other entities can serve to draw an institution into the flow of the learning continuum and widen its constituency and base of support. True partnerships strengthen their partners, increase organizational capacity, and accomplish mutual goals. Colleges and universities — wary, perhaps, of too many linkages — must seek to identify ways they can realize their potential and solidify their long-term prospects by forming and nurturing partnerships.

Among the many Kellogg Foundation programming efforts currently underway, a few highlight the opportunities inherent in these three approaches:

- In August the dedication of the Tuskegee Institute Continuing Education Center underscored the critical role minority institutions play in creating a society of lifelong learners. Historically Black colleges and universities; institutions that meet the needs of special student populations, such as Gallaudet; the thirty-three tribal colleges that

Congress established as land-grant universities last year — all have important functions in the higher education community. Through grants providing funding and technical assistance, the Kellogg Foundation is continuing its focus on strengthening institutions and mobilizing their resources to address the future needs of present-day populations.

- An initiative spearheaded by the University of the State of New York Regents College is working to expand the intellectual foundation for providing services to adult learners — both today and in the decades ahead. The Regents College is the lead institution on a commission focusing on the long-term education needs of adults. If the workers of today and tomorrow will be learning and re-learning throughout their lives, the commission strives to provide higher education with the necessary intellectual resources to do the job.

- The Food Systems Professions Education Initiative — a program involving twelve groups of grants of higher education institutions — was begun in 1994. Forty-six institutions from twenty-two states are participating in the initiative. The administrators, faculty, and students of these academic institutions join business and industry, civic organizations, and environmental and natural resource conservation organizations to create partnerships aimed at developing innovative approaches to food systems education. The long-term goal of the effort is food systems professionals who are better prepared to address the complex food systems issues of the next century — and institutions better able to prepare them.

The promise of higher education — and, I believe, the purposes that will guide institutions into the next century — are waiting to be developed. By reaching beyond and working outside of institutions, sharing the technology and resources available, and partnering to accomplish long-term goals, colleges and universities can expand to become more responsive to society's needs — and find themselves better prepared to meet the challenges of the future. Institutions can take steps now to study, to organize, to begin this process. And I believe all of you are really the keys to success.

At this symposium, you have heard a great deal about outreach, about pushing your boundaries outward, about extending the reach of your institution beyond its existing classrooms and students and looking into the future to see what lies ahead. But as you return to your offices and classrooms tomorrow or the next day, I urge you to look not outward, but inward to discover the path before you.

Consider the mission of your institution — think about why it was founded, by whom, and when and how. Ask yourself: Where has it been? Where might it be heading? and, What is your role in that process? Reflect on your private view of society's needs, the community your institution serves, and our time in history — whether or not you see our

time in hopeful terms. Cultivate your own vision of what might be — what could be done with the resources your institution possesses, what would be possible if all things were possible. In the private recesses of your own thoughts, honestly place your institution in this vision. See where it fits, where it doesn't, and what it needs to be part of your vision. And then, with all the candor that internal ramblings can afford, identify where you can muster the courage and creativity needed to lead this type of change.

Change — whether small or great — demands much of its participants. Realigning your institution with the knowledge needs of the future will demand a great deal of a great many. When you leave here, you will take with you the wisdom of Michigan State University's experience in integrating outreach into its mission and the tools this learning has brought forth. But you will also take with you the strength of your own vision — the germ of what your institution can be in the time yet to come.

Carry it carefully, protect it as you travel and, when you return to your home soil, plant it in a sunny spot. Feed it with your private vision of what is possible and nourish it with your conviction of what the future may hold. Draw on your institution's mission, its resources, and its strengths to nurture this seedling. And — in time, with care, with courage and a little patience — you will see it bear fruit.