

Ready—Or Not?

Early in 2008, when we chose the theme for AAC&U's 2009 annual meeting, we could hardly have predicted the dramatic change in the landscape for higher education that would emerge within a few turbulent months. "Ready or Not: Global Challenges, College Learning, and America's Promise" has proven all too apt a framing for the ongoing turbulence that began about a year ago. By the time the meeting took place in January, the economy had careened, upending the financial models for public and private higher education and forcing both our nation and our communities into an era of hard and often heart-rending choices.

As we move forward in this new and uncharted terrain, we will need to make consequential choices about our institutions, our shared commitment to higher learning, and our own lives—choices that will shape the future of our democracy for decades to come. In this difficult season, we will need all the collective wisdom, judgment, and courage we can muster: to think through our long-term situation, to evaluate evidence and alternative

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

scenarios, to make reasoned choices in the face of profound uncertainty, and ultimately, to keep centrally in view the larger picture and the longer-term good.

I am reminded, as I think about this new landscape for decision making, of David Brooks's bleakly insightful observation immediately following upon Hurricane Katrina. Storms, he observed, wash away the surface and reveal the stratifications, the structures, and the inequalities that were always there, underneath and unacknowledged. In different ways, both Peter Sacks and Martha Nussbaum probe the same point in this issue of *Liberal Education*. Even as storms buffet us, our current circumstances force us to face the more difficult dimensions of our enterprise: the structures of inequality that lie beneath the surface, taken for granted, shaping our world, framing the future.

In *Tearing Down the Gates*, winner of the 2009 Frederick W. Ness Book Award, Sacks calls attention to the deepening inequality in access to college for those from lower-income families. Standardized testing has long been the arbiter of both institutional and individual merit, even though such testing analyzes a very limited aspect of total human capability and potential. Since higher test scores empirically correlate with higher family income, the quest to enroll—and provide financial aid to—students with documented "merit" inevitably hands further advantage to the advantaged. The whole process has actually widened the class divide between those with meaningful access to higher education and those who lack it. This inequity was there all along, and the current tumult promises to make it worse. In challenging us to reverse our long and searing history of inequitable access to successful completion of a college degree, Peter Sacks makes common cause with the Obama administration and the several major foundations that have declared their intention of dramatically increasing access to post-secondary learning for all Americans.

The goals set by the new administration are laudable, but so far they remain troublingly incomplete.

College access alone cannot make Americans "ready" for a turbulent world. Access is necessary, and completion is important. But what matters most is the actual course of study: its goals, its practices, its standards for excellence, its support for students as they meet those standards—in short,

its commitment to quality. What matters is the breadth and level of the capability students develop—their knowledge, yes, but even more significantly, their developed ability to apply their learning to new settings, new problems, and new challenges. As Martha Nussbaum—winner of the 1999 Ness Award—reminds us in these pages, all college curricula are not created equal.

Some courses of postsecondary study are narrowly framed, by design. They provide technical proficiency, but little insight into the larger issues of science, society, human community, and global cultures. Such programs enable graduates to acquire jobs, but they by no means prepare them to navigate a world in which whole industries—indeed, whole economic sectors—are being rapidly upended and rapidly recreated.

By contrast, a liberating education, as Nussbaum points out, makes human development its focus and its commitment. It not only prepares students for economic opportunity and success, but it also engages the wider world. And it deliberately cultivates the capacities needed to make sense of complexity as well as the commitment to consider responsibility to the larger community as a central concern in making decisions, including economic decisions. A liberating education prepares graduates, in short, not just to ride out the storm, but to work constructively with others to chart a journey through the storm toward a better tomorrow. A liberating education prepares—or should prepare—graduates to make judgments and decisions that lessen the likelihood of further human-induced economic storms. And, not least, it cultivates interior qualities—the virtues—that provide a moral compass.

Should our society invest in an education for complexity and change, or should we invest in narrow training? Woodrow Wilson illuminated the actual decision on these points exactly one century ago: “We want one class to have a liberal education. We want another class, a very much larger class of necessity, to forego the privilege of a liberal education and fit themselves to perform specific difficult manual tasks.” In 1909, of course, only a minute percentage of our society even thought of enrolling in college at all. But even today, when a large majority is being urged toward college, only some Americans will get a liberating education. Many others, as Nussbaum reminds us, will become technicians—people who know a few things well but very little about the larger society in which they are citizens, or about the larger global community in which forces beyond their ken shape their fate. They may or may not prosper economically, but they will almost surely lose out on much that they need—and deserve—from a richer, fuller, and ultimately wiser education. The narrow training provided to all too many, we need to remind ourselves, is richly subsidized with public dollars in the form of student aid.

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In recent years, AAC&U has worked to clarify the ultimate goals and intended learning outcomes of a liberal education, and to demonstrate their value to a dynamic and innovative economy as well as our democracy. We are a great nation and a great people; we need to educate everyone for the very real challenges of a demanding and turbulent global century. If instead we repackage trade school and pretend it’s really college, we disinvest in our future and deny the promise of America. A quality liberal education—not narrow, technical training—is the key to fulfilling that promise.

At a time when policy leaders across the country are making postsecondary access and completion a priority, we call on them to enlarge their vision and to make the expansion of human capability a priority as well.—CAROL GEARY SCHNEIDER