

## **"WHY WE CAN'T WAIT"**

Address by Dr. William B. Allen  
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Good afternoon. Thank you for inviting me to speak with you today. This is one of my first opportunities to address a group of faculty and administrators from many institutions at once. One of the goals that I have set for myself as Director of the Council of Higher Education is to engage in a broad conversation with faculty and administrators from Virginia's colleges and universities, and I welcome the chance to do so today.

The Association of Communication Arts and Sciences includes members from secondary schools in addition to those in higher education. Too often we forget the essential education continuum that extends from early childhood through the baccalaureate. There are too few settings where K-12 and college-level educators meet to exchange ideas, concerns, and information. I congratulate you for having created one such setting.

Dialog that engages the full educational enterprise is particularly needed today. Many individuals within and outside the enterprise have described the 1990s as a decade in which educational reform has been near the top of national and state agendas. While a good start has been made in some areas, much remains to be done if we are to achieve the scope of reform urged in *A Nation at Risk* and other major studies. There is not much time left if we seriously want to start the 21<sup>st</sup> Century with these reforms securely in place.

One critical task that has not yet been fully accomplished is the engagement of a sustained, honest, and purposeful public discourse both about the reasons why reform is needed and the goals it is intended to achieve. There has been no lack of rhetoric and reports. All of them remind us of the truth conveyed by the fabulist, Jean de la Fontaine, in his brief tale called "Education." There the opposite fates of the twins, Caesar and Laridon, remind us that intellect and character are the goals we seek and, moreover, that we can achieve the best of both only as a result of deliberate effort. What has been lacking is real engagement among the stakeholders within and outside the academy in a setting that promotes listening as well as speaking, moving from finger-pointing or hand-wringing to constructive development of solutions, and evaluating frankly what we have and have not done.

I mean to engender just this sort of public discourse about education in Virginia. I hope our time here today will allow us to engage in such discussion. In addition to your questions and suggestions about the pressing education issues facing Virginia, I hope this audience will also have suggestions for me about fruitful means for generating a broad public conversation.

Certainly a conversation has been invited and has, in fact, begun. With the appointment of the Blue Ribbon Commission on Higher Education and the creation of the Joint Legislative Committee on Higher Education Finance, both Governor Gilmore and the General Assembly have launched a public discussion of issues of major importance. I wonder, however, if the media, the institutions, and the general public - as well as the politicians and the policy-makers - have entered into this conversation in a way that invites the honest and purposeful exchange of ideas.

It would be a shame and a waste if in this hour we did not move beyond the platitudes of "more money," on the one side, and "more savings," on the other. Every informed observer must know that the path to better education is rather a conversation about what makes education a public good and not just a useful tool. So we should begin right now to rescue our conversation about education from the green eyeshades. It is no more true that public support for education is declining than it is true that we can reasonably expect legislators to move into a period of economic downturn with a focus on lifting the tuition freeze at our public institutions. We can ask for a commitment to guarantee our campuses appropriation increases at the level of inflation plus an increment for merit. But we can do so only if we provide a conversation that unites around the good of education rather than divides around supposed supporters and opponents. We are not there yet.

Consider the language used by newspapers throughout the state to report on the start of this conversation. "Governor, college presidents square off." "These are fighting words." "Gilmore butts heads with professors." "Rhetoric from the governor and the college presidents has been heating up." "Every year the rhetoric seemingly grows less temperate, more extreme." And finally, "In this hissing context, no one will win."

To be sure, the media were playing off Tim Sullivan's comment - often reported without the full context - that "I believe we are enjoying the best of times, and we are looking at the possibility of the worst of times. Some college presidents have suggested that Armageddon is just around the corner." The media also quickly and widely replayed Governor Gilmore's characterization of that comment as "shrill" and "extreme." We all recognize the trend in the news media to seek out and highlight opposing viewpoints. To a certain extent, we must settle for making allowances for that tendency and go on about our business. But, I encourage those of us who are engaged in this conversation to look for ways to move beyond rhetoric and posturing into real dialog, which can lead to action.

At his Executive Leadership Workshop last week, Governor Gilmore extended the olive branch to the college presidents. As President of the Council of Presidents, Tim Sullivan had already pledged that the Governor could "count on a spirit of cooperation and innovation" from the group. Being an optimist by nature, I believe that this dialog will move forward productively. Sullivan has assured us that the college presidents are "ready for change."

But, being also a realist, I wonder if all of the faculty and administrators at Virginia's colleges and universities are equally ready for change. I wonder if we can even fully envision the enormity of the change that yet lies ahead. I know that some of the folk I've spoken

with since my arrival here in June have expressed the hope that enough restructuring has already been accomplished and that we can return to "business as usual." From some faculty and administrators, the message I hear about restructuring is "Been there. Done that." Yes, we have been there and we have been doing restructuring. But, no - we are not finished yet.

We know that, in a democratic society, major policy changes result either from a long period of consensus building or from a perceived crisis. The adoption of managed health care exemplifies a massive policy change that resulted from a perceived crisis. I do not think we are yet at a full crisis in education - although there are parts of the overall education system that are in crisis, particularly the elementary and secondary institutions in certain urban school districts. Overall, however, there is still potential for educators, policy-makers, and legislators to create change through consensus building. We have some time left in which to create change through consensus. Not much time, but some.

We can, however, learn a lot about the nature of the change we must fashion by studying the factors that led to the imposition of managed health care and tracking its development and results.

In a recent issue of *Wall Street Journal*, Richard Vedder posed this question, "What sector of the American economy has faced rapidly rising costs for several decades, with third parties, including government, paying most of the bills?" He responds, "Health care? Sure, but also higher education. And the economics of rising costs are likely to force radical changes at many of our colleges and universities."

The relentless increase in the cost of higher education, which has consistently outpaced the Consumer Price Index year after year, is certainly the most obvious parallel to the agent of health care reform. But there are issues underlying the cost increases, which we must also understand.

One issue that Vedder addresses is productivity. He has hard words for us on this topic. "Most of us today teach the same way Socrates did more than 2,300 years ago, albeit not as well. What other profession has had absolutely no productivity advance in 2,300 years?" Now, I happen to believe that the dialectic approach to teaching advanced by Socrates remains the most effective teaching approach ever devised. It is hard to envision a more fruitful approach if we measure productivity in terms of student enlightenment. A professor himself, Vedder may be engaging in the hyperbole that Tim Sullivan recently called "an honest and noble tradition" in academia. He knows, surely, that the goal of teaching is to elicit independent production from students and not to produce standardized widgets.

Still, Vedder has accurately pinpointed one of the key issues that we in the academy must address - faculty productivity. We need to address productivity at two levels. At one level, we have a public relations problem. Despite the efforts of the faculty over the past several years to dispel a negative public image, many outside the academy still view teaching as a relaxed profession - to put it mildly. Is not this a perfectly understandable confusion? After all, the Latin term, *schola*, yields our name, "scholars," but originally means,

“leisure.” The fact is useful learning is the highest and best use of leisure. We should rather exert ourselves to inculcate appreciation of leisure well used in high callings than defer to the colloquial impression of leisure as a surcease of labor. But we cannot afford to consider faculty productivity exclusively a PR issue. We must also find ways to increase faculty productivity. At Michigan State University where I most recently taught and served as dean, President Peter McPherson led a productivity revolution that emphasized increasing faculty contact with students each week. Faculty workload reviews are a legitimate response to the concerns that have been expressed. And because I have led a successful effort to extend and defend faculty workloads, I know it can be done.

A second, critical issue hidden within the cost increases in health care and higher education is a mindset of growth. A 1995 article on “The Health Care Mess: A Bit of History” (from *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association*) makes this important point. Much of the mess that the health care industry experienced in the 1980’s and 1990s can be attributed directly to earlier successes of the industry. Following World War II, the United States faced major deficits in health care personnel and acute care hospital beds. The authors of this article, Julius Richmond and Rashi Fein, observe that “These problems were corrected, indeed overcorrected. Furthermore, our various health care efforts worked not only to increase resource inputs, availability of care, and access, but to improve health outcomes.” The difficulty that Richmond and Fein astutely critique is that

Policymakers, health care professionals, hospital administrators, and the public had no experience with adequacy of resources. We behaved as though we still had deficits. The United States was growing; incomes were expanding. It was easy and natural to assume further growth and to plan within an ethos of expansion that had come to be considered synonymous with progress.

You will readily agree, I am certain, that by substituting a word here or a phrase there, these quotations could refer directly to higher education. No one has missed the relentless prophecies of cohort growth over the next decade and the increasing likelihood of overbuilding on campuses. The successes of our colleges and universities in responding to the demand for higher education, which was fostered by the GI Bill and which led to our own post-World War II expansion, have left us equally shackled with a mindset of growth. Open-ended, infinitely expanding enrollment is the very soul of the large, research university, and particularly the public university. There, productivity is far more routinely measured by growth in numbers - matriculants and dollars - than by any other factor. The broad administrative challenge that we in higher education must ponder is how to privilege dynamic approaches to learning over inertial growth.

A closely related problem to the mindset of growth - for both health care and education - is that most of the growth has been evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Both professions have lacked a unifying vision that might shape growth and policies. While the pluralism of higher education as a system is one of its strengths, “disjointed incrementalism” is not the healthiest method for growing an individual institution.

Given these, and other, similarities in the problems faced by the health care industry

and the academy, must our fates also be the same? The physicians tried to ignore the fact that economic realities no longer could leave their god-like status unchallenged. Managed care filled the vacuum and imposed reform on them.

Writing in 1995, one observer of the developing managed care systems offered this sobering thought, "Providers and employers began to realize that the political handwriting was on the wall... If they didn't do something to reduce costs, the government would have to step in, possibly with price controls. In other words, if market players did not take the initiative themselves, health care reform could be revived as a political football, probably to the detriment of providers and employers."<sup>1</sup> Three years later, one is tempted to add "also to the detriment of those needing health care."

Richmond and Fein conclude that the health care providers did not move quickly enough, saying, "It has been surprising that the control of medical care moved out of the hands of health care professionals so rapidly and with so little resistance."

It is up to those within the academy - particularly the faculty - to demonstrate to a concerned public that we can effectively control our own fate. But we cannot control our fate from within the Ivory tower. An active, sustained conversation with the public that we serve must be at the heart of our restructuring efforts. I invite us to move that conversation forward now.

I don't believe that college presidents or the faculty intend to see education moved out of their hands. Restructuring efforts have been underway, although at times these efforts have resulted more from external pressure than from internal recognition of their need. But, the public - and public bodies - still await demonstrated results from these processes. There is good news and bad news in this. The good news is that they are still waiting for us to do something on our own, and the bad news is that they are still waiting for us to do something on our own.

<sup>1</sup> Buxbaum, Peter A. "Lower costs, fewer choices." *Transportation & Distribution*, v. 36, no. 12, Dec. 1995.