



Climate Change in the World of Higher Education

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WE FACE SOCIETAL AND ECONOMIC CHANGE at every level in the United States. Giants of heavy industry, retail trade, communications, and the service sectors are streamlining, retooling, and reinventing themselves. America's colleges and universities must do the same.

Even with the stimulus package offering important forms of relief and opportunities to higher education, the sharply reduced circumstances in which we find ourselves are so dramatic as to justify the label of climate change, as opposed to a passing storm.

Historically, watershed moments such as this have pushed universities to restructure everything from basic research to how and where our undergraduates live. This time, rather than being reactive, we should pause to ask careful questions about how best to move toward a transformation of our own choosing.

The GI Bill, one such watershed opportunity for universities, was passed when the return of American soldiers from World War II threatened to boost unemployment and plunge the economy back into depression. It helped to stimulate an era of growth on American campuses, expanding programs and providing the fuel for the economic expansion of the 1950s through training engineers, scientists, and business leaders.

At the same time, and not coincidentally, the postwar years also witnessed the acceleration of federal commitment to research through the collaborative efforts of the government, private industry, and research scientists at the nation's institutions of higher learning. These research centers welcomed the dollars flowing their way and built great programs in engineering, the sciences, and medicine. There is no doubt that our collective response has had long-term benefit to the nation. Yet our response was also reactive



and, without our anticipating it, fundamentally altered the mission of higher education.

For instance, it was not until fifteen years after the National Science Foundation was created that the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities were launched in 1965. Even then, the latter had nowhere near the resources of their science and health counterparts—leading to an imbalance in emphasis and a perception that the arts and humanities intrinsically had less value. This distortion took root in our universities. The question remains whether it reflects the values of society at large or, conversely, whether it might have contributed to our current state of affairs.

The present crisis creates an opportunity for American universities to transform themselves into new academies of their own choosing. This time, the investment must proceed well beyond bricks and mortar on our campuses, beyond renovated science labs and additional funding for biomedical research—though that is critically needed and very welcome.

This time, our investment should include commitments that will return us, in profound ways, to the transporting promise of the liberal arts—freeing all of us, teachers and learners alike, from the limitations of our self-centered perspectives; enabling us to understand the world from others' viewpoints; and empowering us to be agents of societal change. For our own students and the communities we serve, we must affirm that education is as much about insight as it is about gaining information or job training; it is about the duty to listen as well as the responsibility to speak out, about the pursuit of wisdom as well as knowledge.

Our challenge, and our opportunity, is to infuse these liberal and humane values throughout the curriculum, in all disciplines and at all levels. We should understand, for instance, that the study and practice of ethics must find no less of a home in our graduate schools of business and medicine than it does in our liberal arts colleges.

Universities must be the place where students and faculty understand the critical difference between free speech and academic freedom; where there is an obligation for civil engagement and where there is a willingness to hold difficult conversations that may lead to better understanding, even as we may be criticized for convening the dialogue. At Emory, these conversations in recent years have included an examination of relations between Israel and Palestine, between China and Tibet, and, closer to home, a sometimes uncomfortable dialogue about our own institution's race relations history.

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If not on a college campus, where else in modern society can such emotionally fraught and self-critical examinations take place? It seems to me that this is the indispensable duty of our universities and one that must flourish if our free and open society is to survive. As we

on college campuses purposely foster informed discussion of issues so sensitive that others reflexively steer away from them, we nurture the skills of passionate civility that are needed today more desperately than ever.

American universities should resist the notion that the economic climate today leaves us unable to influence our own destiny. We should become institutions that engage in what our community's vision statement at Emory has dubbed "courageous inquiry." In a global economy where one country's collapse endangers others; in a global incubator where an animal virus can mutate to humans and prompt a pandemic; in a global ecology where delayed responses to changes harbor the potential for planetary disaster; and on an international stage where nuclear warfare remains a threat, universities must offer a venue for robust, fearless debate and scholarship.

While economic stimulus can give us deeply welcome new investments in our laboratories and in our financial aid programs, it cannot perform for us the hard work of academic community. Engaging and re-engaging across the gulfs of human difference—between student and professor, faculty and administration, campus and town, nation and world—remains the unavoidable, and irreplaceable, work of the academy. This is the climate change we need, in a moment of crisis we cannot afford to waste. ■