

The Truman Commission's Vision of the Future

by *Philo A. Hutcheson*

Looking back over three centuries of American higher education, one can see both strengths and weaknesses in the changing attitudes toward teaching goals. But, while there have been changes, the shifts may not be as dramatic as one might think. One shift that was especially apparent in the 20th century, however, is the movement toward making college teaching both a democratic activity and an activity extolling the virtues of democracy. That movement is well articulated in the work of the 1947 President's Commission on Higher Education, which, with the G.I. Bill of 1944, marked the beginning of a substantial shift in the nation's expectations about who should attend college.

President Harry Truman appointed the higher education commission in July 1946, as World War II was ending and the nation was readying itself for peacetime and the possibilities for a future in which the U.S. would play a central role in world affairs. (The commission is known as the Truman Commission, in view of the fact that Harry Truman, the only U.S. president in the 20th century not to graduate from college, appointed a commission that advocated increased access to college.) Truman charged the commission members to examine "the functions of higher education in our democracy."¹ At the commission's first meeting, John Steelman, a key aide to the president, stated:

We face national decisions that are as important as any that have confronted us since the federal union was formed. These decisions are made in a democracy by

Philo A. Hutcheson is associate professor of educational policy studies at Georgia State University. His publications include a co-authored article, "National Higher Education Policy Commissions in the Post-World War II Era: Issues of Representation in The Sophists Bane (Fall 2003) and A Professional Professoriate: Unionization, Bureaucratization, and the AAUP (Vanderbilt University Press, 2000). He is currently at work on a book on the 1947 President's Commission on Higher Education for publication in 2007.

the people, and not by a Government apart from the people. Their choices are governed in large part by their opportunities for education aimed at producing effective citizens.²

The need for a government that reflected the people was highlighted both by the atrocities of war—especially those committed by Nazi Germany—and the brutalities committed against African-American veterans upon their return home. The Truman Commission’s proposed solution had two goals: (1) to educate college students in a broad program of general education and (2) to improve college

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teaching. The commission viewed these two goals as intertwined, and it identified the first two years of college as a critical period for educating citizens, hence its emphasis on community colleges.

In this article, I discuss the Truman Commission’s positions on general education and teaching, and its view of community colleges. In addition, I argue that two changes in the demographics of higher education, one numerical in terms of enrollments, the other in how the nation has viewed students of color, have continued to be important in the decades since the commission released its report. The recent report of the Secretary of Education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education, appointed last year by Margaret Spellings, also addressed the issues of general education and teaching. I offer a view of that report within the context of teaching and democracy.

It is important to distinguish general education from the liberal arts and from common institutional practices. General education is the common education that all college students ought to receive, which is different from the liberal arts with its multiple disciplines. General education often refers to the basic distribution requirements that students must complete for graduation. These requirements allow selection among a variety of courses, and hence students do not share a common education.

The Truman Commission members declared that general education was indeed similar to liberal education, but they insisted on a unity of knowledge—not necessarily the same courses for all students, but “from a consistency of aim that will infuse and harmonize all teaching and all campus activities.”³ (The commission also discussed extracurricular and co-curricular activities; for the sake of this

article, I only discuss teaching.) The objectives of general education in the commission's view, were, not surprisingly, multiple, and they included students' development of "ethical principles consistent with democratic ideals," as well as the ability to act as "an informed and responsible citizen" in a democracy and to recognize the need for international understanding.⁴ Commission members cautioned that colleges and universities would only succeed in realizing these goals if professors recognized and accepted "the importance of such instruction to society and [demonstrated] their willingness to assume initiative and responsibility in reorganizing instruction."⁵

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The commission made it clear that higher education should be far more accessible to the nation's citizens. In fact, one of the best-known statements of the commission report was that approximately half of the nation's citizens were capable of completing the first two years of college (thus, highlighting the importance of community colleges). The report from the commission was unequivocal on the need for access resulting in an educated citizenry:

Equal opportunity for all persons, to the maximum of their individual abilities and without regard to economic status, race, creed, color, sex, national origin, or ancestry is a major goal of American democracy. Only an informed, thoughtful, tolerant person can develop and maintain a free society.⁶

With regard to instructional skills, the commission recognized that graduate students were not being prepared for college teaching, stating that the "most conspicuous weakness of the current graduate programs is the failure to provide potential faculty members with the basic skills and the art necessary to impart knowledge to others." Recommendations included relaxing departmental control over graduate programs, providing a certificate of teaching preparation (as a complement to the Ph.D.), recruiting and admitting a far more diverse group of students into graduate programs, and initiating teaching internships.⁷

As a result of the commission's work, by the end of the 1940s, there was a clear and highly visible statement on the need for U.S. higher education to change whom it admitted and how it taught students. (The commission's report, *Higher Education for American Democracy*, was so widely read and debated at the time of its release that one author writing in 1953 indicated that he could not provide a full listing of all of the articles he had read on the commission's report because the number exceeded 500.⁸) A reasonable historical question, then, is what changed in

terms of admissions and teaching as a result of the commission's work?

The first test came when veterans began entering colleges and universities in great and unexpected numbers following the passage of the 1944 G.I. Bill. The veterans' impact was not simply numerical but also perceptual as they altered faculty and administrators' expectations about who could succeed in college. Grizzled, battle-hardened soldiers were clearly different from fresh-faced college boys and girls, and the veterans showed not only that they could compete, but often that they could outperform traditional college students. While recent empirical investigations have shown that many of those veterans were in college or were college-bound when World War II began, nevertheless, the myth of who were appropriate college students began to shift.

What is noteworthy is that college teachers did not seem to adapt the content and pedagogy of their courses in response to the expansion of the student body and the recommendations of the Truman's Commission. Curiously, but perhaps not surprising in view of the commission's arguments about graduate programs and teacher preparation, there is no strong evidence that there were any substantial changes in course or program content that reflected the need to provide an ethical view of the importance of democracy. Rather, the veterans willingly, even enthusiastically, adopted the traditional expectations of college student learning.⁹

A second surge of adult students began entering higher education in the 1970s, many of them attending community colleges. Factors causing this enrollment increase were varied and included career and family transitions that left adults—often women—seeking decent-paying jobs. Aggressive marketing of community colleges as institutions that welcomed students of all ages fueled this



growth. As a result, during the 1970s, the transfer function of the community college began to fade as students increasingly enrolled at community colleges to secure or improve career skills.

As this higher education enrollment surge developed, K. Patricia Cross, and other postsecondary teachers, recognized that these adult students did not have the same preparation—particularly the immediate academic experience of high school—as traditional-aged students, yet they brought extraordinary levels of motivation and curiosity to the classroom. Cross authored major texts on adult learners, including her 1981 book, *Adults as Learners: Increasing Participation and*

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Facilitating Learning. In this book, she offers an extended discussion of how adult students learn, based on analyses suggesting that there were different ways of learning and knowing. In the chapter, “Patterns of Adult Learning and Development,” she argues, “If we know where an adult stands in intellectual development, we are in a better position to help him or her advance to the next stage.”¹⁰ Thus, in the 1970s and 80s there appeared to be some recognition by institutions, and especially faculty, of the importance of adjusting their approaches to teaching in order to address background differences among students.

Women began to enter U.S. colleges and universities in considerable numbers in the late 1800s. Scholars have noted the conditions those women faced were far from welcoming. Many faculty members and students made it clear, often with direct and public statements, that women did not belong on campus. Conditions had not improved much by the 1950s, although they had changed to some degree. Women were part of the campus but were typically relegated to marginalized positions in terms of expectations for their life on campus.¹¹ In terms of careers, the Mrs. Degree was a common expectation.

The rising movement of feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s led to different ways of viewing women as college students. Not only was there an increased emphasis on career options for women, but professors and administrators began to address how women were viewed in the curriculum and pedagogy. A wide variety of scholars, many of them women, raised concerns about a curriculum that generally asked students to speak, write, and think in terms of “he.” They argued that curriculum and pedagogy in higher education were inextricably linked. By the late 1970s, these scholars succeeded on many campuses in establishing women’s stud-

ies centers. Of special concern was the tension between the perceived need to establish these studies centers and the resistance to including so-called women's issues in courses. While women's colleges were often successful in offering an education that fit women, some scholars say the possible lessons from those institutions rarely resulted in efforts to create classrooms at coeducational institutions that recognized not only women but also women's ways of knowing.¹²

Yet in this wide arena of women and learning, noticeable shifts in the arguments about general education have occurred. During the 1980s, scholars and intellectuals of all ideological persuasions battled (in what are sometimes called the

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Canon Wars) to reaffirm or redesign what students ought to know. Although the core idea of great books, or at least great ideas, remained constant, general education courses—whether they were for all students or served as distribution requirements—increasingly incorporated published works with different voices. White women faculty and faculty of color often led the charge to change the curriculum, arguing that students would be more thoughtful and tolerant if they understood that great ideas came from different sorts of people.¹³

In addition to scholarly analyses of students, curriculum, and teaching over the decades since 1947, following in the footsteps of the Truman Commission, there have been other national reports about higher education.¹⁴ The most recent, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*, was issued in September 2006 by a commission appointed by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings. This commission's report articulates a need for higher education to perform differently and better than in the past, reiterating concerns about global economic competitiveness brought to the nation's attention in another national report, the 1983 *A Nation at Risk*. In terms of access, the Spellings Commission stated that not everyone needs a higher education but all citizens need some post-secondary education, because it is "vital to an individual's economic security," and other nations are "passing us by at a time when education is more important to our collective prosperity than ever."¹⁵

The Spellings report, in identifying access as a major challenge for higher education, echoes a concern of the Truman Commission. But, for the Spellings Commission, there is a different form of access, not one designed to educate citizens about the value of democracy. There is virtually no discussion of an "informed, thoughtful, tolerant people." Furthermore, teaching is not discussed,

much less analyzed, as a process. Rather it is viewed as an outcome, clearly evident in the commission's concern that students are not completing their postsecondary education because they are not sufficiently prepared. Students need to be "on track for college,"¹⁶ the Spellings Commission report argues. Ironically, as the generation of World War II veterans who fought to make the world safe for democracy is passing away, it appears that the dominant purpose of higher education is to prepare better workers rather than citizens who represent the best of democratic virtues, as the authors of the Truman Commission report had recommended.

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In regard to the other central concern of the Truman Commission—the "failure to provide potential faculty members with the basic skills and art necessary to impart knowledge to others"—what is apparent is that while there is a national commitment to providing a higher education to any who would seek one, there is an equally powerful tendency for universities to allow departments educating graduate students to serve as their own supervisors and for universities to find academic prestige not in the quality of teaching but in the quality (and output) of research.

There are, therefore, two ongoing institutional impediments to the development of teaching as a democratic activity: (1) the impetus to reproduce researchers and (2) the drive for institutional prestige. Those impediments are reinforced by a professional impediment: the lack of clear national norms for excellence in teaching. By contrast, there are norms for research and scholarship in the disciplines and fields of study that offer doctorates. That is not to say that there are not norms for good teaching, but to say that American higher education has not yet developed a means for articulating and reinforcing those norms.

There is also a deeper problem, one implicit in the discussion of veterans, women, adult students, and the economic demands on higher education but perhaps most poignantly evident in my deliberate omission of students of color. In a most curious contrast with public schools, colleges and university administrations and faculties rarely address student background as if it were an important, much less central, characteristic of teaching and learning. I am fortunate to be a professor of education in regular contact with public school teachers, whose interests, as expressed in innumerable papers, reflect their persistent need to understand teaching and learning in the context of the tremendous variety of students in their classrooms. Somehow in the transition from 12th grade to the first year of college, despite the multiple college teaching initiatives, students lose their cultural her-

itage in the classroom and become little more than teachable objects.

Finally, some aspects of the Truman Commission report appear robust in higher education in the early 21st century. The diversity of enrollment is startling in comparison to the late 1940s. Furthermore, the content of courses is often far more democratic than it was then. Even many Great Books lists deliberately reflect a comprehension of the many peoples and their voices within this nation and globally. General education is still more of a selection of different courses than a unified attempt to have students see across disciplines and past their individual experiences, but introductory courses typically show a breadth of content far different from the assumptions of what society apparently looked like—white, male, and middle class—in the 1940s.

Nevertheless, the remarkable diversity of college students today gains little attention in college teaching. Despite the concerted efforts of advocates of feminist forms of knowledge and pedagogy, despite the ongoing work of thousands of community college professors with adult students, we continue to think of teaching as a mental activity separated from students' backgrounds. While there is a substantial literature on diversity in higher education, some of which reminds the reader that students come into the classroom with interests built upon their cultural backgrounds, this literature too rarely intersects with the literature on professors and teaching.¹⁷

I believe it is time to improve college teaching by integrating the pedagogical knowledge of schoolteachers into an active and ongoing professional development program for college teachers. Such a large-scale program has the potential to offer faculty members and students an ethical view of the importance of democracy. The Truman Commission sought to convince laypeople, policymakers, and educators alike that recognizing students as both students and human beings with cultural backgrounds was a key component of teaching in a democracy. Sixty years later, this conviction is still valid. To paraphrase a popular expression: It's not what you know, it's how you teach it to whom. 

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Harry Truman, "Letter of Appointment of Commission Members (July 13, 1946)," *Higher Education for American Democracy*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948), no page.
- ² John Steelman, "Opening Address," (July 29, 1946), Goodrich C. White Papers, Special Collections and Archives, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Box 17, Folder 5, 1.
- ³ *Higher Education for American Democracy*, vol. 1, 49.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 50-51.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 3.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. 4, 16, 19-21.
- ⁸ James G. Harlow, "Five Years of Discussion," *Journal of Higher Education* 24 (January 1953) 17, n. 4.

- ⁹ Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1987).
- ¹⁰ K. Patricia Cross, *Adults as Learners: Increasing Participation and Facilitating Learning* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1981), 182.
- ¹¹ Lynn D. Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990); Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the End of the Eighteenth Century To The Present* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1987); Linda Eisenmann, *Higher Education for Women in PostWar America, 1945–1965* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2006).
- ¹² Elizabeth Minnich, Jean O’Barr, and Rachel Rosenfeld, *Reconstructing the Academy: Women’s Education and Women’s Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Mary Field Belenky et al., *Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).
- ¹³ W.B. Carnochan, *The Battleground of the Curriculum: Liberal Education and the American Experience* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993). Henry Louis Gates, *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
- ¹⁴ Philo A. Hutcheson, “Setting the Nation’s Agenda for Higher Education: A Review of Selected National Commission Reports,” *History of Education Quarterly* 47 (August 2007), 359-367.
- ¹⁵ U.S. Department of Education, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education* (Washington, D.C.: 2006), x.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*, 17-18.
- ¹⁷ For examples of students as teachable objects rather than members of cultures, see <http://jchemed.chem.wisc.edu/Journal/issues/2006/Dec/abs1763.html> (retrieved May 5, 2007); www.mdc.edu/learninginnovations/pages/reports/LEAGUE%20FOR%20INNOVATIONS%20CONFERENCE%20april.03.doc (retrieved May 6, 2007).