Higher Education – A Short Look Ahead

It’s good to be back in Kansas City among friends. I would be less than candid if I did not say that I am proud to be here – aware as I am of the prestige of this podium, the distinction of those who have preceded me in leading these lecture-discussions, and above all the quality of the audience which gathers here with some regularity and which is here today.

As Charlie Kimball and I were talking about what I might say to lead off the discussion, he suggested that I try to avoid concentrating on the financial plight of higher education; that I say something about how we got where we are and then take a look into the near future – say the next three to five years. I shall try to follow his advice, although I must confess that as I look over this audience I find it difficult to resist the temptation to talk about the financial needs of the University of Missouri. Moreover, despite my comfort in practicing the craft of the historian as opposed to the uncertain art of the prophet, I shall try to avoid dwelling too much on the past.

In the years following World War II, higher education, in common with all other elements in American society, was greatly transformed. For our colleges and universities, the years between the middle 1940’s and the middle 1970’s constituted a time of great growth. Between 1945 and 1975 enrollments in institutions of higher education increased from 1.6 million to 11.2 million; the number of institutions increased from 1,685 to 3,055; and the annual budgets for higher education increased from $1.8 billion to $37.9 billion.

Growth in enrollment was brought about first by the GI Bill of Rights under which millions of World War II veterans went to college and, in the process, established college-going as the norm – something which had not been common prior to World War II. Veterans were succeeded by those born during the baby boom of the early Forties. Not only were there more young people of college age, but also more of them were going to college – particularly women, persons of both sexes from minority groups, and people from non-minority families who had never thought it possible or desirable to go to college. Graduate enrollments increased even more dramatically than undergraduate enrollments. This was in part a response to the demand for more Ph.D. ’s to teach the ever-growing number of undergraduates and in part a response to the vast sums of money poured into our major universities to fund graduate fellowships and graduate research opportunities, particularly in the sciences as the country sought to overcome the advantage the Soviet Union apparently had in science when the Russians launched Sputnik in the fall of 1957.
The explosive growth in higher education was but one aspect of the revolutionary changes which swept across the United States in recent years and particularly during the decade of the Sixties. An important element in those changes, and one which affected our colleges and universities tremendously, was the insistence that the individual play an increasing role in determining his or her own destiny and in governing the institution with which the individual is associated. It can be summed up in the phrase “One Man One Vote.” This put a particular strain on our colleges and universities which by their very nature are, to put it frankly, elitist and at the very least based on the concept of meritocracy. Moreover, in our big universities there was the dichotomy in mission – research versus teaching – or so it seemed.

The carriers of revolution are almost always the young – Thomas Jefferson was 33 when he drafted the Declaration of Independence – and the best and the brightest of our young people are concentrated in our colleges and universities. It is not surprising, then, that our institutions suffered the strains not only of internal upheavals, but also of the efforts on the part of many to use them as springboards for revolutionary efforts in external causes such as the Civil Rights Movement and opposition to the war in Vietnam.

Our colleges and universities suffered political and financial backlash as we sought to find scapegoats on which to blame our troubles, but that particular difficulty was relatively short-lived and was by no means as serious as the general anti-establishment spirit which has affected virtually all of our institutions – educational, religious, business, and philanthropic.

For higher education – and, I would submit, for the country as a whole – a particularly critical problem is that involved in the debate on whether college is worthwhile. The difficulty which many college graduates, especially those in the humanities and social sciences, have had in obtaining what has seemed like satisfactory employment has been dramatized – indeed over-dramatized – as part of the anti-establishment rhetoric which has dominated so much of the media in recent years. I do not treat the employment problem lightly, but I would submit that it is more a societal than an educational problem; that the question itself, let alone the answers that have been propounded by some of the shriller voices which have sought to make themselves heard, portrays a lack of understanding of what higher education is all about. I would be glad to go into this further during the discussion period, should anyone desire to, but let me conclude this brief sketch of the recent history of higher education by suggesting that although it has been a story of crisis compounded by crisis, our institutions, even though heavily marked by the scars of the recent past, have endured. I hope they will continue to make strides toward recovering, but, looking ahead, there are many possibilities for further buffeting.

Among the more serious problems facing us in the early Eighties will be those growing out of demography.

Persons born during the baby boom of the World War II period will have moved almost completely through the entire educational system. The impact of this has already been felt for a number of years in the elementary schools and more recently at the secondary level. The peak year for the number of 18-year-olds in the U.S. population will probably be 1980. The Census Bureau estimates that there are nearly 4.3 million 18-year-olds in the population this year. The number will drop in each of the succeeding years through 1986 when there will be only about 3.5 million 18-year-olds, a fall of about 18 percent over seven years. The college-age group – the 18-to 24-year-olds – will continue to grow until 1981 when it will start to decline. Compounding the prospective decline in the pool of college students is the decline in the college-going rate. A
decline of 1.5 percent during the fall of 1976 ended a quarter century of uninterrupted growth in college enrollment. Since 1976, enrollments have fluctuated. Among factors holding down enrollments are the large number of veterans who are losing eligibility for education benefits – the number began dropping sharply in 1978 – and a high percentage of applications for the federal government’s basic educational opportunity grants which are being rejected for one reason or another.

Predicting enrollments is a hazardous business. There are simply too many imponderables which enter into the individual decision as to whether a person is going to college in any particular year. There was a general anticipation that there would be a decline this fall in college and university enrollments, but it appears that there actually will probably be an increase of about one percent nationally and perhaps even more in the Midwest region.

As you know, there are regional differences in population projections. For the near term for colleges and universities, the important figure is the number of 18-year-olds in the population. There will be growth in some states and decline in others. For instance, Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska are among the states for which little change is projected in the next few years. Further complicating the situation is the fact that, if we take a longer view, we can see that enrollments probably will increase markedly in the late Nineties.

In any event, I think it can be said that higher education will probably not be one of the nation’s major growth industries in the 1980’s, at least not in the sense that growth occurred in the preceding three decades. This condition of no growth is compounded by inflation, which takes as heavy a toll on our colleges and universities as it does on business – indeed, a heavier toll because colleges and universities, which are labor-intensive and which are outside the normal pricing structure, are limited in the ways in which they can respond to the demands of inflation. Some institutions will suffer more than others. Some will fail. Even the strongest will have serious problems.

To maintain their vitality, institutions must change. And this is particularly true of colleges and universities. In the recent past, change has come as a by-product of growth. In the near future, change will have to occur without growth. It is change which probably poses the greatest challenge for persons occupying jobs such as the one I hold.

One result of the need for achieving change in a period of no growth will be an intensification of the controversy surrounding curriculum. The common wisdom that today’s students are more “career-oriented” than were students a few years ago is supported by a recent research report of the American Association for Higher Education. We are seeing fairly dramatic changes in curricular preferences – rapid increases in such fields as business, engineering, law, and the health sciences, along with declines in the humanities and certain of the social sciences. One aspect of this shift has been the dramatic increase in cooperative education programs, which combine academic training with related work experience.

In the past decade such “work a semester/study a semester” programs at U.S. colleges and universities have expanded from 70 to a total of 300. Nine institutions within Missouri (including Rockhurst College here in Kansas City, the University of Missouri-Rolla, and Washington University in St. Louis) offer such programs. Two institutions in Kansas (Friends University in Wichita and Kansas State University in Manhattan) also have cooperative education programs. I suspect that these programs will continue to grow during the 1980’s
particularly since they are encouraged not only by student interest but also federal interest in the form of funding.

There has been, is, and will continue to be a curriculum controversy stirring in higher education. The controversy will focus on whether students should be educated specifically for jobs and careers or generally for life. The cooperative education programs are an example of the former approach. The widely publicized returns to the “core curriculum” at Harvard University and the University of California at Berkeley are examples of the latter.

Frankly, I do not see this issue as an either/or situation. I think that as we move into the 1980’s we will see less polarization on this question and more of a blend or mix. I think that effective ways of programming for both considerations will become an ever-increasing emphasis for higher education in the future.

It is apparent that we live in a rapidly changing world, and higher education needs to provide the key to living in this kind of world. We need to educate students so that they can manage change. Higher education needs to provide students with the ability to be flexible – to handle life and particularly to provide leadership in an increasingly complex technological society.

I think that eventually this is where the argument for educating solely for a career will fail. For instance, the most recent survey of the U.S. Department of Labor reveals that Americans now change jobs or careers at least five to seven times within a lifetime. Therefore, those individuals with a broad-based education, which is well balanced in both liberal and professional studies, will be best suited to cope with this kind of shifting.

For a wide variety of reasons, education on a part-time basis has become another trend. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, part-time enrollment is expected to increase 45 percent by 1986. This phenomenon is created primarily by the return of older students, particularly women, to our campuses. Currently, older students are the fastest growing groups of college-goers. You may be interested to know that more than one-third of all college students today are 25 years or older. This will be a continuing trend in the Eighties not only in actual numbers and proportions, but also in terms of recruitment and accommodations on the part of our institutions.

The impact of part-time adult students will be felt particularly in professional fields. Most states – Missouri is a notable exception – require periodic continuing education for relicensure. The professional schools in our universities are the institutions best equipped to provide this continuing education.

In conjunction with this trend to more part-time students on campus is another national trend in higher education – open learning programs via television and other media. The University of Mid-America – which is comprised of 11 Midwestern universities, including Kansas, Kansas State, and Missouri – is one of the leaders in this move toward higher education for the nontraditional student. Although I think that there will definitely be increased emphasis on such programs during the Eighties, I hasten to add that there are limitations as well as advantages. Despite the tremendous sophistication involved in delivering courses to the home by electronic-means, it simply cannot replace the individual contact between student and professor within the traditional campus setting.
Another trend may be toward the presence of more foreign students on our campus. Some institutions are frankly recruiting foreign students to make up the prospective deficit in domestic enrollments. This does not seem to me to exhibit many qualities of educational statesmanship, but I do discern a trend toward more international educational exchange, and I think that it is possible that the United States may become more actively involved in exporting its educational and technological know-how through the process of higher education. Another prospect – beyond the near term – is that as we approach the bottom of the pool of young people in this country, we may be forced to educate more foreigners, particularly from the underdeveloped countries, to fill positions needed to keep our economy rolling.

Domestically, we face the problem of accommodating the increasing diversity of educational background of our students, and particularly the problem of dealing with those who are poorly prepared.

For the fifty universities in the United States and Canada – including the Universities of Kansas and Missouri–which constitute the American Association of Universities, many of the important questions about the future involve graduate education and research. I need not tell this audience that universities are not the only institutions in which meaningful and important research is conducted. By the same token, I am sure that no one here would dispute the statement that the health of our research universities is critical to the well-being of institutions such as Midwest Research Institute, to say nothing of the nation as a whole. Universities not only provide an environment conducive to research, they also provide training for the next generation of researchers.

Most of the funding for university research comes from the federal government. In recent years federal support of university research has been declining, and this is but one element in the fact that the United States is no longer the world’s leader in research and development. I can’t help but believe that there is a relationship between this fact and the fact that we are no longer the world’s leader in productivity. Indeed, increases in productivity tend to parallel increases in support of research and development. The higher education community was encouraged by President Carter’s introduction of a nine percent increase in funding for basic research next year, in a generally austere budget insofar as education is concerned.

Concern for and appreciation of the relationship between research and productivity are two factors which recently brought together, under the auspices of the American Council on Education, a small number of university and corporate executives to establish what is known as the Business-Education Forum. I might add parenthetically that Archie Dykes, Paul Henson, Barbara Uehling, and I from this immediate area are participants in what could prove to be the development of a structure which will serve to bridge the gap which we all know has existed between business and higher education, to the disadvantage of both.

A common problem which we in higher education share with those in business is government regulation. Although government regulation can impose, and in some instances, portends serious limitations on the freedom of our colleges and universities, operationally most of our current problems derive from what Robert M. Rosenzweig, Vice President for Public Affairs at Stanford University, has called “the unintended consequence.” We are afflicted not so much by those actions which are directed at institutions of higher learning as educational institutions – although we are by no means free of such action – as by those actions which are directed at us because we are institutions doing business in an increasingly regulated economy.
Universities, like other institutions, are impacted by the government’s interest in labor law, social security, retirement, safety, privacy, and the employment aspects of civil rights legislation. Mr. Rosenzweig comments with masterful understatement, “This class of government activity has been the source of large direct and indirect expense, growing bureaucracy within institutions, a great deal of litigation, and an enormous amount of controversy. Taken together, these repercussions of government involvement have significantly limited institutional freedom of action ....”

For public institutions, regulations come from the state capitals as well as from Washington. As higher education becomes more expensive and as the competition for financial resources gets more severe, state legislatures and state governors seek to find ways to exercise increasing amounts of control and accountability. No one in his or her right mind suggests that institutions should not be held accountable for stewardship. The only questions are how and to what purpose.

I mentioned earlier that perhaps the most serious problem facing a university president in the early Eighties will be the management of change in a no-growth condition. For the public university president, the management of accountability both to the federal and state government will rank a close second.

Finally, as I conclude this short look ahead, let me say a word about the nature of financial support for higher education. In times past, the factor which most distinguished private from public universities was the source of support-private universities being supported almost entirely through philanthropic and other private sources, and public universities, aside from limited fee and tuition income, from tax sources. Today all that has changed. Private universities, through federal research and training grants, student aid programs, and other techniques, have become major recipients of federal funds. By the same token, public universities, in an effort to achieve a degree of excellence not possible through tax support and tuition alone, have turned increasingly to the private sector for support. This trend, I think, will continue in the years immediately ahead, and it is a healthy one. The challenge before us is to maintain the independence of both sectors and to preserve the diversity which has characterized American higher education for almost two centuries. That diversity, with its high degree of freedom, has served the nation well. I am confident that both in the immediate years ahead and in those beyond, it will continue to do so.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

QUESTION: There are approximately 3,000 colleges and universities in the United States. Instead of cutting back each institution by 10 or 20 percent, wouldn’t it be better simply to close that percentage of institutions?

ANSWER: It might be. There are some schools that are not going to make it. What bothers me is that we may find ourselves in a situation in which, for political reasons, the public will be asked to take over defunct nonpublic institutions.

Again, the problem is who makes these decisions. The great strength of American higher education is its local control, its diversity of control, and its individual boards of trustees. I would rather struggle along with too many institutions than be part of a situation in which somebody in Washington, or perhaps in Jefferson City, could arbitrarily decide which institutions would go
under. I think that there are some middle approaches. One way to keep down costs would be for state government to prevent the proliferation of public institutions and expensive programs in public institutions.

I rather think, too, that institutions will seek ways to maximize their unique abilities to contribute, just as the media have. As I observe it, we are seeing a trend toward more specialty magazines and fewer tremendously big magazines circulated nationally. We may be seeing a trend toward institutions which provide specialty degrees. The State University of New York at Purchase, for instance, which is basically an institution of the arts, is an example.

QUESTION: You touched briefly on the question of quality. Would you comment on the effect on quality of this decline in the student pool. Could such a decline tempt institutions to lower their standards in order to attract students?

ANSWER: I think this is a very real problem as institutions seek to maintain enrollments. One approach, of course, is to admit students who aren’t as well qualified as those who were admitted five to ten years ago. I am not as fearful of that approach as some people are because I rather think that the self-selection that goes on in this country will make such an effort generally unsuccessful. A more serious problem is a gradual erosion of quality.

QUESTION: How are your tenure policies going to work with this no-growth proposition?

ANSWER: You heard me suggest that the toughest problem university presidents will have to contend with is the period of no growth. Tenure is a part of the problem. One of our concerns is that we do have in our U.S. educational institutions, faculties which are generally tenured. At the University of Missouri we are above 50%, which is not as high as many other institutions. Ours varies from campus to campus, the St. Louis campus having the lowest percentage of tenure.

I believe in the tenure system. When it was adopted, it served a very real purpose, and I think it still serves that purpose. There is nothing wrong with a professional having a degree of job security, particularly a professional who deals in ideas, because people tend to disagree about ideas. One of the problems we face is that tenure frequently is looked upon now as an economic crutch. While this is not altogether bad in terms of society, from the institutional standpoint we may end up with people who are no longer qualified to do the things we need to have done.

I mentioned earlier that change could occur as a by-product of growth while growth is occurring. What happened in the Fifties was that you just worked around these tenured people. You added people. There was no serious problem. What I sense now is that faculties themselves are beginning to be concerned about the effects of tenure. I think we are going to be seeing a more rigid stance on the part of faculty groups on qualifications, on continuing performance, and, indeed, on filling needs. But this will remain as we work around a well-established system to deal with these problems of change.

QUESTION: You made reference to the faculty’s problem of dealing with poorly prepared students. You are president of a multi-campus university in Missouri. What has the university done and what can the university do?

ANSWER: That is a good question. We have not done as much as we should have. However, as we see it, the two principal and most serious problems – and there are a number of them – are derived from the inability to use the language and the inability to use mathematics.
The University of Missouri-Columbia is engaged in a fairly imaginative project right now, a so-called writing project, in which they are bringing in high school teachers from all over the state for very intensive work. The program is now in its second year, and we are beginning to see some results. We also recognize that as a public institution we need to take young people where we find them. At the University of Missouri Kansas City, we have a learning center which I think is helping some people. We have a similar program at St. Louis. In both law schools we have programs that teach people to write.

I do think, however, that the most important thing we can do as citizens is insist that our elementary and secondary schools not only provide opportunities, but also be given the chance to carry out those opportunities. A teacher who has from 35 to 50 students in an unruly situation in which he or she has no control is not in a very good position to do an effective job. One of the problems of the teacher shortage is not that we have too many teachers, but that we simply are not using enough teachers to do the job effectively. We have a great opportunity in that we do have a fairly good supply of secondary teachers in most of the basic fields, if we somehow could find the resources to hire those teachers.

QUESTION: Despite the progress, isn’t there still a lot of agitation for a Department of Education?

ANSWER: I am one of 50 presidents of major universities in the United States and Canada who have gone on record as opposed to the new Department of Education. I am not suggesting that education needs less support, but it seems to me that what this country does not need is a greater federal presence in higher education. I can see no benefits that will transcend the dangers of the trend once established. I doubt very much that you could establish a department of education and say we are going to do it just for a few years to see how it works. It does not happen that way.

Now, unfortunately, I think we are going to lose. As I look at my crystal ball, I think we are going to get the Department of Education, so the problem will be to try to operate within it. And, of course, as is true of all developments in the United States, we have enough good sense and are resilient, regardless of what we do to ourselves.

QUESTION: The multiple campus system is apparently new to Missouri. How would you evaluate it in this state, as compared to the one in California and to some of those states which have had the concept much longer?

ANSWER: The multiple campus concept was designed to provide coordination and direction for the large university system, as it did in California where the University of California is the original multi-campus system. We can take advantage of size in purchasing and in other non-educational areas. We also can take advantage of size educationally.

One of the best examples of the utility of the multi-campus system is the cooperative undergraduate engineering program here in Kansas City. For years the University of Missouri-Kansas City, and earlier the University of Kansas City, had a program in general engineering which was never accredited and which, chances were, would never be accredited. We dropped that program and, instead, made arrangements whereby the school of engineering at Columbia teaches programs in undergraduate engineering fields at Kansas City. These are Columbia degree programs, offered in Kansas City. I think this is an excellent example of what a multi-campus system can do.
And many provide diversity. For example, the two medical schools at the University of Missouri are as unlike as two medical schools could be. It’s a planned diversity, not just a randomly developed diversity. It’s a good combination of a completely atomic-fragmented kind of higher education and the super-board system, such as is found in Texas.

QUESTION: In the near future, say the next five years, do you see an increase in state funding in Missouri for its elementary and secondary schools which would aid the University in getting better quality students?

ANSWER: It is difficult to predict whether we are going to be able to stay ahead of the ravages of inflation with the present level of support. I am hopeful because I think there is a growing awareness in this country of the importance of providing a strong basic education for our young people. Just knowing that the world is more complex, in my opinion, adds to that awareness.

QUESTION: In reference to changes in the student population (older students, employed students, part time students), I have expressed concern also about another subject you just touched on – accreditation. Is there a simpler way to maintain quality accreditation and yet give people such as the ones you described an easier time getting in?

Many of them go to less well-recognized institutions simply because it’s easier to get there.

ANSWER: The system of voluntary accreditation we have in the United States is a good system. The alternative is to turn accreditation over to the federal government. HEW already has a major bureaucracy which deals with accreditation problems. As members of the North Central Association of Colleges and Universities, we have worked out a system of voluntary accreditation in which we go around and look at each other, in a sense, and make some judgments about our institutions.

There is also professional accreditation. The American Bar Association accredits the law schools; the American Medical Association accredits the medical schools; and the Engineering Council accredits the engineering schools. I am inclined to think this poses more of a problem than regional accreditation does because the professional accreditation groups, for the most part, are dominated by the deans of these schools, and these people can pose certain problems for the general administration.

QUESTION: Does the lowering of admissions standards appear to be keeping people away?

ANSWER: At the University of Missouri we admit those students – freshmen, for example – who have what we think is a fifty-fifty chance of succeeding. That is, they’re in the upper half of their high school classes. The closer they are to the middle of their class, the better scores they must get on the SATs and so on. For those who are below the middle, they must score even higher on the exams. We don’t have an arbitrary system; we do have an admissions system but are not an open admissions institution.

QUESTION: The University of Missouri at Kansas City may be a better example than most right now of easier access. You get into the situation, though, where an older person or an employed person wants to take a certain three-hour or six-hour course load and is told that in order to do so he or she must take nine hours of something else. Can you comment on this?
ANSWER: I am not sure that I associate that problem with accreditation. Basically, we indeed do turn over to the faculty the matter of altering the curriculum and the standards, and I doubt very much that any of you would want your children to go to a school in which the faculty is not competent to make those decisions. Just as I doubt very much that any of us would want to go to a doctor who has to be told precisely what to do in each case. There are times when the faculty’s judgment gets in the way of an individual’s progress, but on the whole I am not sure that it is as serious a problem as the question implied.

QUESTION: But doesn’t it encourage students to go to less demanding institutions?

ANSWER: Well, there is bound to be some of that. But I doubt very much if our good liberal arts colleges and our major public universities would like to think of themselves as dumping grounds, in a sense, for everybody. This is a two-way street.

QUESTION: Would you comment on ways in which the corporate community could better discharge its obligations or potential responsibility to public higher education than by purely financial support; and whether you see the increasing dependence on private sector support as ominous in terms of a growing tendency by the corporate sector to impose judgments of curriculum?

ANSWER: The ways in which the corporate leadership of this country can make itself felt are to take a greater personal interest in the affairs of our institutions – to serve on boards, to serve on advisory committees, and to participate in dialogue. Rather than ominous, it seems to me that this can be a very good omen. I think the trend we are seeing in this country of a closer association between corporate executives and university executives is beneficial. Among the activities many institutions participate in – we do it on several of our campuses – is an “executive for-a-day” program. We recognize that you cannot take much time, but if you can spend time with classes in philosophy, for example, these would be very useful activities. I’m not going to say money is not so important – it’s terribly important – but I think the involvement, personal involvement and interest of the leadership is, in the long run, even more so.

QUESTION: Speaking of money, and I’m thinking of earned income rather than contributions, what is the role of athletics in the future of universities?

ANSWER: At the University of Missouri we look upon athletics as a campus matter, so I try not to get involved directly in athletics. Even so, among the questions that I have spent the most time with since I moved to Columbia, those related in one way or another to athletics would be high on the list. We have professionalized university athletics to a very high degree. Some institutions use educational funds for the support of athletics. At the University of Missouri-Columbia, we use no general operating funds or state funds for the support of athletics. That means football has to generate all of its income. We have an athletic budget of approximately $5 million a year, and we are rapidly increasing the amount of money we are putting into women’s athletics. I mentioned Title IX. The budget was over $0.5 million for women’s athletics on the Columbia campus this past year and is more this year. Athletic budgets are also subject to the ravages of inflation.

I really don’t see that the trend will change, because in the United States we like bigness and we like winning, and as I look across the country I don’t see many institutions that are going to take the leadership in pulling out of athletics. I think athletics have very important and
legitimate roles even with the problems that are connected with their funding, with their management, and with the expectations people have.

COMMENT: I was thinking particularly of a remark that Jack Steadman, President of the Kansas City Chiefs, made to me in a meeting the other night when he said, “Without the TV contract that the NFL has, every pro football team would be in the red.”

ANSWER: Without the TV contract, every school in the Big Eight would also be in the red. There is no question about it. Our TV contracts are very important; our advertising contracts are very important; and we have a very difficult time in going to play a school at home that does not have a big stadium. We just simply cannot afford it.

QUESTION: Do you find it disturbing to hear that the United States is no longer Number One in research and development efforts?

ANSWER: This is a disturbing trend. Institutions such as MRI need greater support, more understanding. We also need greater support, especially in our big research universities. I think this is an area in which we have to be careful about specialization. As I mentioned, there are 50 universities in the United States and Canada which are members of the American Association of Universities. These have large graduate schools, but they do not represent all the important research conducted in these schools.

QUESTION: We’re getting into the philosophy of education, and your answers have been precise. Would you care to comment on what the emphasis of professional education, specialization, the humanities, and the sciences will be in the next ten years or so?

ANSWER: All have had their ups and downs. I think there is a growing awareness, despite the fact that professional school requirements, for example, are getting more and more refined, of the so-called “well-educated person.” There is a growing awareness that education that is solely career-oriented is incomplete. I see more emphasis on the arts, on the humanities, and on certain of the social sciences. I’m optimistic with respect to their future.

QUESTION: What about standards of classroom performance, both with respect to the faculty and with respect to the students, and the recent phenomenon of grade inflation?

ANSWER: There has been grade inflation in recent years. There was a lot of it during the Vietnam War. This was, in part, a reflection of a kind of disillusionment with the process. It is difficult to determine the difference in general ability or performance between that student who has a 3.9650 and that student who has a 3.9625 grade point average. Everybody knows that kind of precision is more or less unrealistic.

During the Sixties, there was a tremendous revulsion against any kind of standards in educational institutions. The jobs of the school were to provide what the students wanted and let the students decide how much they wanted. The students merely wanted it to be “relevant.” I think the shallowness of that approach is gradually dawning on people.

I recall a student retreat we had at the University of Missouri-Kansas City a number of years ago. One young woman, who had come from Central High School here in Kansas City, made a comment about her relationship to the university that has always stayed with me. She was in a session where one of our more activist student leaders was berating us on what we should be doing and what we shouldn’t be doing. And this young woman said, “You know, I didn’t come to this university to teach anybody anything.” I sense a trend, though, toward a
greater faculty awareness of performance just as, I think, there is also that trend in our professions.

Generally, we have to keep in mind that the self-policing professions – law and medicine, for example – have some difficulty in dealing with individual failures. The academic profession is no different. We have certain other kinds of situations, in that the professor delivers his or her services not as an individual so much as an employee of an institution, which further complicates the relationship of the professor to the profession.
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Midcontinent Perspectives was financed by the Kimball Fund, named for Charles N. Kimball, President of MRI from 1950 to 1975, Chairman of its Board of Trustees from 1975 to 1979, and President Emeritus until his death in 1994. Initiated in 1970, the Fund has been supported by annual contributions from individuals, corporations, and foundations. Today it is the primary source of endowment income for MRI. It provides “front-end” money to start high-quality projects that might generate future research contracts of importance. It also funds public-interest projects focusing on civic or regional matters of interest.

Initiated in 1974 and continuing until 1994, the sessions of the Midcontinent Perspectives were arranged and convened by Dr. Kimball at four- to six-week intervals. Attendance was by invitation, and the audience consisted of leaders in the Kansas City metropolitan area. The lectures, in monograph form, were later distributed to several thousand individuals and institutions throughout the country who were interested in MRI and in the topics addressed.

The Western Historical Manuscript Collection-Kansas City, in cooperation with MRI, has reissued the Midcontinent Perspectives Lectures in electronic format in order to make the valuable information which they contain newly accessible and to honor the creator of the series, Dr. Charles N. Kimball.