

# LIVES *of* COMMITMENT

## *Higher Education in the Life of the New Commons*

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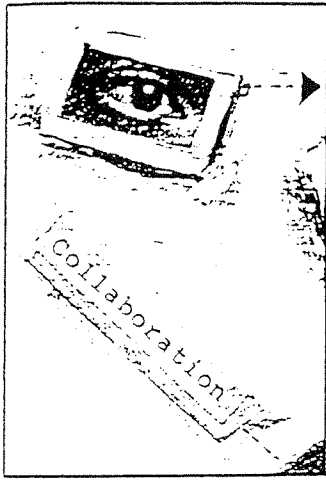
**T**he morning news announces a plan to build an 8-foot wall around a public school in Augusta, Georgia, to protect it from stray bullets coming from an apartment complex next door. Describing shopkeepers in the South Bronx who wear bulletproof vests, Jonathan Kozol writes in *Amazing Grace*, "defensible stores, defensible parks, defensible entrances to housing projects, defensible schools....All these strategies are needed if our society intends to keep on placing those it sees as unclean in the unclean places." In a society that no longer works, fortification sometimes seems our only recourse.

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Just when international communications, economic forces, and ecological realities have placed us on a new global commons marked by unprecedented interdependence, it is ironic that many Americans are retreating ever further into private enclaves, erecting ideological, financial, ethnic, and professional fortifications around ourselves to seal out others who are in some way different and who appear to threaten our sense of who "we" are. Indeed, as sociologist Robert Putnam has persuasively shown in a now-classic *Journal of Democracy* article, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," the past decade has seen a steady flight on the part of many in our society from public institutions, civic commitments, and an economic stake in a larger common good.

Mainstream higher education has always placed the cultivation of citizenship among its central purposes, and many on campus are concerned about this tendency toward intensified individualism and tribalism. Yet caught in the riptide of postmodernism, and struggling to relocate our own culture on the global commons, we have foundered as we seek to discern a more adequate form of citizenship for the 21st century. What does it mean to educate people for citizenship on the new commons? How do people form and sustain commitment to a common good that includes the whole earth community? What is the role of higher education in the formation of the people we need for citizenship on the new commons of the 21st century?



## COMMITMENT TO THE COMMON GOOD—100 LIVES

Bill Wallace, a chemical engineer, is founder and CEO of Enviro-tech, a major toxic waste processing firm outside of Philadelphia. Keeping up with changing technology and shifting government regulations is a stiff challenge. "We've been pioneers in what's called bioremediation," he explains, "using indigenous microorganisms to clean up in a natural way, as opposed to putting a lot of iron on the site and burning everything to a crisp. So we try to be relatively innovative and cost-effective, and at the same time meet the regulatory requirements—or go beyond them if we can."

For years, Louisa Jackson, has been helping low-income women in Denver and their children to find economic stability. In her current work as a housing advocate, she has enabled dozens of single mothers to improve the living conditions for their children. Recently, she coached a group of homeless women for a successful meeting with the governor to discuss housing policy.

Prime mover in the formation of the American arm of a major international relief organization, Lowell Rankin now manages a specialized investment firm in St. Louis directing donors toward worthy projects. Recently, these have included support for reforestation in Nepal, the creation of an economic cooperative among villagers in Bolivia, and funding for a conference of inner-city shelter managers to increase collaboration.

For at least a decade, and in most cases longer, each of these people has sustained a steady commitment to the common good in the face of sometimes overwhelming complexity and discouragement. As different as they are, they hold in common a concern for a future that includes everyone, a conviction that regardless of difference, *everyone counts*.

What was the nature of the environments in which these people's lives were formed? What elements now sustain their commitment in the face of complexity and ambiguity?

Over the last five years, we have been studying the lives of people like Wallace, Jackson, and Rankin who have ventured beyond their own tribal campfires to share a common fire. We have conducted detailed interviews with a representative sample of over 100 people who have demonstrated commitment to the *common* good through sustained work in such areas as education, economic development, social change, science and medicine, and a host of other fields. We have sought to learn what kinds of experiences encouraged them to understand themselves as part of a wider world, and what sorts of rela-

tionships, opportunities, institutions, and habits of mind helped them as adults to sustain work on behalf of the whole.

We have identified many factors that appear to be significant during the first three decades of a person's life. Not all appear in every life, and no single one is determinative, but in a variety of combinations they appear to increase the probability of living a life of commitment to a larger whole. They include publicly active parents, hospitable homes, safe and diverse neighborhoods, active participation in religious life, community adults who model commitment, youth group service opportunities, mentors, and for almost all of those we interviewed, critical experiences in college or graduate school.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education is not essential for commitment to the common good, nor does it guarantee it, but a good college education can play a crucial role. At their best, colleges and universities provide a place where students may move from ways of understanding that rest upon tacit, conventional assumptions to more critical, systemic thought that can take many perspectives into account; make discernments among them; and envision new possibilities.

The deep purpose of higher education is to steward this transformation so that students and faculty together continually move from naiveté through skepticism to commitment rather than becoming trapped in simplistic relativism crusted over with cynicism. This movement toward a mature capacity to hold firm commitments in a world that is both legitimately tentative and irreducibly interdependent is crucial to the formation of citizens for a complex and changing future.

In our study, we found that this capacity for what William Perry calls "commitment in a tentative world" is characterized by a cluster of "habits of mind":

- *Dialogue*—grounded in an implicit understanding that meaning is constructed through an ongoing conversation between oneself and others;
- *Interpersonal perspective-taking*—the ability to imagine with reasonable accuracy how the world might look and feel to the other;
- *Critical, systemic thought*—the capacity to identify parts and the connections among them as coherent patterns, and to reflect evaluatively on them; and
- *Holistic thought*—a nascent form of multi-systemic thinking that intuits life as a whole.

These habits grow only slowly during the

college years and do not mature until later when, for many of our interviewees, they evolve into *dialectical* and *integrative-paradoxical* thought. But a good higher education lays essential groundwork for them. What sort of college environments foster this kind of learning?

### *A Mentoring Environment*

Together, students, faculty, staff, administration, and the wider community constitute the complex ecology of higher education as a *mentoring environment* that can provide knowledge, challenge, support, and inspiration for both students and younger faculty. In conducting our interviews, we heard about courses that crossed disciplinary bounds, teachers who challenged old and partial ways of thinking, mentors who inspired students to do important work and coached them along the way, guest speakers who brought the world onto the campus, vigorous dialogue among people who differed but were expected to respect one another, and key experiences of service, internships, and travel that enabled them to step out of the classroom into the world and bridge the gap between campus and commons.

### *The Content of Texts*

Despite the term's pejorative use, the majority of the people in our sample would probably not object to being described as "generalists," for they take pride in the effort to see things whole. Having attended college anywhere from the 1930s on, most had studied the liberal arts, and the most frequent major was literature, followed by history, sociology, political science, and economics. Several specifically mentioned interdisciplinary courses or programs had challenged them to become "multi-faceted minds," as one put it, a valuable asset when dealing with complex challenges. Among graduate degrees, education, business, medicine, religion, and international relations were mentioned most often. (Again, ours was a relatively small and carefully constructed sample, so we caution against overgeneralization of these findings.)

Many described themselves as having been "voracious readers" as children. A physician who designs innovative public health programs told us he still rereads Dickens every two years; others mentioned the power of reading biographies, particularly those of African Americans or women who achieved public power. It appears that good literature, drama, and film, coupled with direct engagement with pressing social and intellectual challenges, enabled them to take the

perspective of others different from themselves and folded a crucial emotional ingredient into the educational mix. This "felt connection" keeps an essential human face on complex systemic problems.

### *Special Teachers and Mentors*

Special teachers were cited, who, as Louisa Jackson put it, "deliberately set out to challenge you." She recalled teachers who "were extremely bright—particularly the women—and they took us very seriously." During her freshman year, she had a professor who taught theology through literature. It was a powerful experience. "Here we were, freshmen in college, most of us from Catholic backgrounds but being handed Nietzsche and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and every questioning, sardonic, cynical thing you could think of—but truthful, always that search for truth. We were just hit over the head with it, and it made you ask 'what does it all mean?'"

While for some the memorable teacher cracked open old convictions, for others he or she served to focus new commitments. Lowell Rankin told us about "a wonderful guy" who frequently met his small class in a local coffee house to discuss the problems of economic development in Africa. It was his senior year, and the course galvanized his decision to join the Peace Corps.

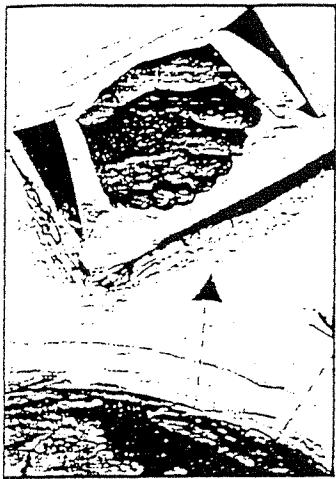
Sometimes teachers took on a special power in a student's life and became mentors. Describing such a professor, Rankin told us, "He had a way of reaching us and giving us a sense of what our potential worth was in life. He was a driving force for excellence in our lives; he had us strive way above our capabilities—what we thought we could accomplish."

In *Beating the Odds*, Teachers College President Arthur Levine has emphasized the critical role played by mentors in the support of low-income students. We found a similar phenomenon among those we studied. A majority of those in our sample described important mentoring relationships with individuals or communities, and we heard many stories of mentors who planted just the right seed at the right time.

Here is one such story: Susan Drucker, now an international leader in the field of global education, agonized during her senior year over what she was to do with her life. One morning, as Drucker was on her way to Senior Seminar, the college president, who knew her well, stopped her in the hallway. "I have something for you," she said, and with a look of casual matter-of-factness, handed her a notice about teaching opportunities in Africa. "This is for you," Drucker glanced at

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the sheet of paper and almost without thinking, replied, "Of course." A few months later, she was teaching school in Senegal.

"I've had people around me—from parents, to teachers, to advisors in youth movements, to colleagues in the university—who have come and asked me to do things that both of us agreed were important," said David Sanderman, a university administrator who has written eloquently and taught widely on the importance of cross-cultural encounter. Recalling a mentor who had helped him as a young adult to understand his vocation and to find fitting work, he said, "There isn't any question that one of the greatest things that we do for anybody else is to show enough confidence to ask them to do something which is important." Mentors support our best aspirations, challenge us to reach beyond ourselves, and perhaps most important, inspire us by giving us important work to do in the world.

### *Speakers Who Link Campus and World*

We also heard often about prominent public figures who spoke in classes, chapel, or special events. Such outside speakers seem to bring the wider world onto the campus, breathing fresh meaning into courses that may have grown stale. Louisa Jackson met Dorothy Day and Rollo May at college, and Lowell Rankin told us that the moment he knew he had to do something positive with his life was when he heard Al Lowenstein "proclaiming that the Silent Generation had come to an end and we'd all better wake up and realize there's a big world out there."

For some students, however, that "big world" was something they went out and found. A number described the profound effect of experiences such as travel to youth conferences, service opportunities, internships, and intensive summer programs. When these experiences are integrated into course work and given broader meaning through dialogue with other students and faculty, they can shape social commitment in powerful and lasting ways.

Individual or group conversations with faculty, administrators, college chaplains, and visiting speakers appear in our study as pivotal influences, too.

### *Constructive Engagement With Otherness*

The single most salient pattern that we found in our study, however, was what we have come to call a *constructive engagement with otherness*. At some point in their formative years virtually everyone in our sample had come to know someone who was significantly different from themselves. This was not simply

an encounter but rather a *constructive engagement* by means of which they could empathetically recognize a shared humanity with the other that undercut old tribal boundaries and created a new "we" from a former "they."

By this measure, cultural diversity on campus becomes a marked asset. Of her alma mater, one woman of Irish-Italian descent told us, "I had a wonderful education at the university. It had 26,000 people; I mean it was really one of the big innovations in urban university education." When we asked her what made it so wonderful, she replied,

It was the mix of people. Political persuasions all over the board, faculty from all over the world, students from all over. But I think what I treasured most was the fact that I had African-American and Hispanic teachers that were my professors—they weren't just students, they were my teachers. Leaders from the communities that we were going to serve were teaching us.

But her experience, along with that of others, reveals that mere proximity is not enough. There must be genuine meeting. Bert Schuster grew up white in a poor, rural part of Alabama. A local pastor had helped him gain admission to Yale. When he arrived there, however, he nearly turned around and went back home. "Talk about cultural shock, going to a big, elite, rich school and then living with a bunch of jocks mostly from the Northeast!" A new world had opened, but the strain might have been too much except that he had to support himself by working in the cafeteria where he formed close friendships with other working students, most of whom were African Americans. "So I began an odyssey of working with black folks, living with black folks, that's led me the rest of my life."

Schuster's case is instructive because while racial differences were engaged, for him and his new friends the class difference appears to have persisted—perhaps particularly so for the "elite jocks." The transformation was begun, but subsequent experiences of engagement with the other would be required to carry it further.

### BEYOND MERE POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

How can we kindle fires that attract and unite us across divides of gender, race, class, ethnicity, religion, nationality, and interests? A political correctness that merely recognizes separate council fires leaves unrealized the power of a common fire. The kind of authority that people trust is what emerges from a shared fire when it works well.

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Vital as it may be, simply putting people together on campus or providing opportunities for service learning, internships, and travel/study is not sufficient. There must be dialogue across real differences about things that matter, and that cannot take place if people are unable to speak about their experiences, questions, and insights, or to communicate what matters. A mentoring environment for citizenship in the 21st century must foster a constructive dialogue that imparts at least three sets of skills.

1. **Critical, systemic thinking.** It is difficult for constructive dialogue to take place if we can't move beyond simplistic thinking and unexamined assumptions. Effective dialogue in which each party in the dialogue frames a context that is large, robust, and differentiated enough to provide for *common* ground enables the conversants to recognize the complexity of an issue and to surface its underlying assumptions.

2. **Perspective-taking and withholding judgment.** This entails a set of reflective skills, some attuned to listening to the other and to reconstructing the other's perspective with reasonable accuracy, and some devoted to assessing one's own thoughts, claims, and responses. This implies not only a search for intersecting and resonant values and perspectives but also a capacity to honor difference by holding some contradictions and conflicts open as one proceeds forward, rather than trying to force them into premature, unwarranted, or demeaning resolutions.

3. **Creating a safe and civil space.** The skills of appreciation and civility need to be cultivated and protected. Treating each other decently, especially when we disagree and when difference challenges values we hold dear, is essential to the best work of the academy. As the academy now secures its most profound legitimacy in relationship to the new commons, hospitality needs to be extended to voices that were previously marginal. The act of setting norms, tone, and boundaries that can hold conflicted discourse creates a shared culture with a teaching power of its own.

### THE CURRENT CHALLENGE

These skills of dialogue undergird the habits of mind now needed in a diverse and complex world, but they are not inevitably absorbed or easily learned—on campus or elsewhere. To activate and cultivate them, we need to develop contexts in which genuine dialogue about real issues will be pursued. In the classroom, this means going beyond simply providing answers, or merely exchanging

opinions, or focusing exclusively on technical disciplinary expertise; it points toward a deeper quality of listening and collaborative learning, to the small class or tutorial that links disciplinary knowledge with the search for practical wisdom. It encourages continual reconsideration of both the implicit and explicit curriculum through a re-examination of the relationships among the disciplines; the teaching functions of the professions; the commitments undergirding research; and the role of service learning, internships, and travel/study in fostering engagement with the contemporary world.

It follows that faculty and administrators should model dialogical skills in their own work together. On campus and off, there is a key role for reflection and new dialogue in establishing the criteria on which institutional assessment and the assessment process itself are practiced. Beyond the individual classroom or program—in the locker room, the dining hall, the dormitory, the lab, and the library—we need to cultivate an institutional ethos that holds a palpable sense of aspiration on behalf of something more than competitive advantage and narrowly defined personal success.

Most specifically, faculty in the classroom as well as those who sponsor extracurricular work should consider ways to promote constructive engagement with otherness in those contexts. As we go about the vital business of transforming our campuses into a positive force for the formation of the kind of citizenship that is called for in the new global commons, we will increasingly recognize that diversity is not a problem to be solved but a strategic asset to be developed. Affirmative action is an important, but only an initial step; political correctness is the awkward beginning of a new and critical conversation. We are still learning how to go beyond simply trying to avoid stepping on each other's toes to participating in real dialogue in which the integrity of the particular is honored and simultaneously held accountable to the whole.

When we do, we will find ways to listen and to speak, as each tribe hears another and is heard: as informed, courageous, rigorous, and respectful conversation turns encounter into engagement. When this happens, the possibility is born for the growth of a larger commitment honoring and transcending the politics of identity and tribe: the possibility of commitment to a *common* good. And when that happens, higher education fulfills a part of its deepest vocation: serving the wider society in the cultivation of the knowledge and practice of citizenship—the cultivation of our humanity—upon which we all depend. □

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