

A Time for Questioning

By Dr. J. Herbert Hollomon

The University's president-designate calls for a reevaluation of higher education

Having only been on the job less than five months, it is premature for me to have firmly fixed views on higher education or on the future of the University of Oklahoma. This year, for me, is one for learning, meeting people, and thinking.

President Cross and the Regents have wisely, I think, given me this time to acquaint myself with the land, the people of the region, its history, its youth, and other universities so that I may better help fashion the future of the University.

During this time I hope to ask many questions such as: What is a university for? Higher education serves what purposes? Who determines these purposes? How are they accomplished? How are these accomplishments measured? Is the education geared to interest and enthuse the student? These are but a few of the questions that I must ask myself and ask others to ask themselves, and hopefully have them share their views with me.

These questions cannot be answered in the abstract, or for all times and all places. The purposes of higher education and the means of accomplishing them are temporal. They vary in time and place. For a time, I can defer

answering these questions and expressing firm views about higher education. However, no man enters a new position with a wholly clean slate. His background, experience, and his personality influence his attitudes and beliefs.

No university can serve its people without there being a full understanding of the heritage of the past, and more importantly, a pre-vision of the possibilities for the future. This land belongs to the youth. The average age of all Americans is just a little over 25 years. At no time in history did a young people enter a world on the one hand so filled with complexities and challenges, and, on the other, so pregnant with the possibilities and the power of learning.

It is clear that all our people have not shared in the abundance of the average American. However, the average American no longer has to work from sunup to sundown, seven days a week, struggling for existence, for food, shelter, or clothing. He now has tools and techniques that provide him with muscle, machines that eliminate routine mental tasks, and leisure in which to spend his life creatively. True, he lives in a world of danger, as he struggles. He sees around him the faceless, inhumane city, the destruction of old values, and the defects in the dream of the democratic ideal that guarantees every American equal opportunity. But, as Eric Sevareid said in a recent piece in *Look* magazine, "No youth now or ever had it so good."

Education must be relevant to this society that it serves, to its purposes, its past, its future, and it must use the tools and the techniques available at that time and in that place. Higher education for the people of Nigeria cannot be like that, or even serve the same immediate ends as in the United States today.

Nor can that of Oklahoma ape the Ivy League or even the system of California. A university serves the people, providing them with the means for continuing their lives. It is, one might say, a bridge between the past—preserving and learning what is known and knowable and translating it to those who will use the knowledge and add to it in new ways along new paths. It is a place that provides the tri-vision each person needs—a vision of the future, a vision of the past, and a vision of the contemporary worlds that lie outside his normal experience.

But today a university must be even more. It has to be a place in which the very assumptions of the society are challenged, where new ideas may be tried out, discussed, and ruminated about. On a campus these ideas, while important and perhaps even the basis for future change, are academic and in a sense not dangerous. They do not usually result in direct action that can disrupt the society or destroy its cherished and useful traditions.



Dr. Hollomon, shown with Regents president James G. Davidson (left), in his first year is following a demanding schedule of interviews, meetings, talks, conferences, and travel so he might acquaint himself with Oklahoma's history, her land, her people, her youth.

On the campus, the Bastille may fall without having a single individual lose his head or without the destruction of the institution or the real concrete world of people and things.

For example, we must question whether we know how to deal with the sprawling growth of cities. Is America to be made up of three or four megalopoli—one on the East Coast, another along the Pacific, and yet another enveloping the Great Lakes—or can wise and innovative men at the universities conceive new cities and ways to build and improve them that will make our whole land attractive and humane?

The problem of Vietnam and its great toll of our resources attracts our national attention and is serious enough. But what of the larger problem? How shall predominantly rich Western Europeans and Americans live in a world that also contains billions of other people, predominantly poor Asiatics? Shouldn't the university examine this and problems like it and perhaps sweep away the cobwebs that blind our view of our role in the great human adventure?

Still the university must be more. Today in the United States man's work is changing rapidly as machines replace his hands and others perform the simple mental tasks for him. The university provides a place where people can learn enough to adapt to these changes. They can learn the skills of the changing world. The university can serve also as a birthing place for new industries and new jobs.

It is no accident that new industries sprang up in Boston near MIT, in Palo Alto near Stanford, or in Los Angeles near Cal Tech and UCLA. Modern industry depends not only on people with higher education but new industries are spawned by bright young people while there. Even so, higher education has become, it seems to me, too much concerned with providing only a four-year liberal education to most, if not all, the citizens. There is still gracious and prideful work to be done with the hands and minds to operate our tools and use our techniques. This society needs people who can program computers, repair and build complicated electronic devices, and do all the other useful and important tasks which make our wealth and give us strength. Our system of higher education must help train them.

A university must be even more. With the quickening pace of change, a man must learn and learn again throughout his whole life. The university must therefore be a center of continuing education in new techniques and in new concepts, not only in the useful arts but in the creative ones that enrich his leisure time. Industry changes, resources are replaced, and the pace of change must be matched with a more effective means of providing to all citizens a means of renewal for new work, or for a new experience in living.

A university serves the community in other ways, through research in all the arts and sciences, advancing new understanding of his world. Each university must choose those fields for research and study that are most relevant to its time and place and in which it can be "first-rate." It can and should examine the laws of the region and provide the legislators with unbiased analysis.

It should, and must, concern itself with learning about the diseases and health of the citizens and teach new ways for organizing and providing medical treatment.

The university also should provide to its students and its faculty and to the people of the region a view of what is excellent and good in the society—good writing, good art, excellent music and dance, good theater, and yes, even good football.

How can the university do and be all these things, and how can higher education be aimed to serve the needs of the society? I say, only by a recognition on the part of the people that their present and future depend upon education and by a recognition on the part of the universities and colleges that the schools must be relevant to the needs and aspirations of the people.

Can universities do all these things and do them as well as they are now organized and managed? Frankly I do not know, but I hope to learn. I suspect, however, that the rapid growth of many of our universities has made the student feel like a cipher or like a cog in a great inhuman machine. I think we must examine the ways in which we can decentralize the authority in our large and great universities, developing a closer relationship between faculty and students or a greater autonomy for local choice and a clear identity of the student with the great possibilities of the university.

My student children and their friends believe that the institutions of higher education are not well connected to the world they see and hope for. Can we somehow bring back that relationship of student and teacher described by Marc Hopkins as a dialogue of two people on either end of a log? Certainly if 18-year-olds must fight in Vietnam and take on the responsibility of men, then if they are responsible, they can participate in the affairs of a university. This is a tradition at Oklahoma cherished by Dr. Cross and one that I hope to maintain and enhance. With all the great problems of the world, the university fails if its students feel alienated and unable to cope with them. There the student should begin to recognize that *he* and *he alone* can better the world—no matter how badly his elders have messed it up.

Finally, learning in a university comes in part from the faculty, a part from osmosis, and by a large measure, from other students. Students learn from others with different experiences, background, interests, and motivations. It is in the selfish interest of those who support a university to encourage the widest possible diversity in its student body. This diversity brings challenge and is perhaps the single most important part of the process of learning about the three worlds—one of the future, one of the past, and the contemporary world. If a football team should seek out talent for its excellence, no less can be done for the artistic and intellectual teams of the university.

These are some of the things written on my slate. I hope that more shall be written there and that I shall be tolerant and wise enough to erase some of these as the time and place dictate and change others as I must as I learn about the people I hope to serve.

Higher education in Oklahoma could serve no better general purpose than the Five Civilized Indian Tribes had for theirs—"To develop the head, heart, and hands." And, oh, I forgot—a university should be fun! **END**