

Inaugural Address of
Alfonso Elder, President
North Carolina College at Durham
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People throughout this country who have followed the development of the North Carolina College at Durham appreciate the fact that the College is the realization of the dreams of a great man, Dr. James E. Shepard. An inquiry into the source of his genius, however, reveals that his successes were the direct consequence of his unalterable faith in the inherent sense of justice and fairness within all people, his understanding and appreciation of the potential power of good will as a means of promoting progress, and his ability to inspire the people of this State to act in accordance with their good intentions.

“Beauty is a part of him who sees it.” Dr. Shepard was great, therefore, because he understood the inner greatness of the people whom he served. He was not alone in his belief and efforts, for during his life, there were many others in high positions as well as in humbled walks of life who cherished similar hopes and worked toward similar goals.

The College stands, therefore, as a symbol of the spirit of good will and cooperation between the races. It is an expression of hope of a struggling people. It represents a disposition on the part of leaders in the State to develop a university for the Negro people – an institution devoted to the development of Negro citizens who are intellectually competent and emotionally balanced.

However significant our achievement to this moment has been, we must not tarry too long in praise of the past, for our task here today is to look to the future. In doing this, the past and the present assume significance only in the sense that our reflections enable us to catch a vision of the ways in which the College may increase its services to the people of this State and Nation.

For many years, the critical problem of the institution was to get established. Initial buildings had to be erected, a competent staff had to be assembled, courses of study had to be

organized, and a spirit favorable to benevolence toward the institution had to be developed. This was a pioneering period in which the institution attained in the minds of the people of North Carolina and the Nation a state of certainty, which is evidenced in the plans now being made for the enlargement of the plant, as well as for the further development of the program.

While we hope to remain on the frontier with respect to experimentation in higher education, it is our responsibility now to think critically on our direction of growth for the future. The time has come when we must focus our internal efforts upon specific goals or purposes in order that our efforts to improve might have direction and meaning. It is not enough for us to say that we are especially concerned with improving life among Negroes in the State and in the Southern Region, for there are many different types of agencies and institutions which seek to improve Negro life. It is not enough for us to say that we are especially concerned with the training of leaders, for we would still have to define the direction which this leadership should take.

To speak of the internal centers of concern of an institution is to describe the spirit of the institution. For example, some colleges are spoken of as liberal and others as conservative. Colleges, like people, have personalities and they differ from each other in terms of the atmosphere or effect which they achieve. Institutions, therefore, cannot escape characterization, for there are always some central attitudes whether good or bad, desirable or undesirable, valuable or worthless which condition, to a large extent, the thoughts and efforts of the persons engaged in the enterprise.

Doubtless, it will be accepted as axiomatic, therefore, that the quality of the contributions of a college can be determined by the extent to which there is a deliberate effort to choose the course which has the greatest significance in the lives of the people served. Thus, it is appropriate for us to ask: What shall be our course of action? By what spirit should we be motivated? How can we discover the desirable direction of our growth?

In an effort to answer these questions, let us assume that we are assembled here to think critically on the problem of the direction of growth of this institution and that I have been assigned the task of discussing possible approaches to the problem of our center of concern.

To begin the consideration, I should like to present two propositions. The first proposition is that we cannot hope to fulfill our obligation to society through an emphasis upon the pursuit of knowledge alone. The second proposition is that we can discharge our obligation and achieve true greatness by concentrating our efforts upon developing those qualities of spirit and action which motivate men to build the kind of world in which it is good for all men to live.

In view of the fact that colleges are essentially institutions of learning and that the acquisition of knowledge is important in the learning process, the statement that the pursuit of knowledge alone is not an appropriate focus of emphasis for charting the course of this college deserves some explanation.

Historically, the acceptance of the idea of the pursuit of knowledge as a central purpose of education has some significance. Also, a casual visit to many classrooms is sufficient to reveal in many instances that teachers are busy disseminating information.

This almost exclusive emphasis upon knowledge has its foundation in two traditional beliefs. First, there is the belief that the knowledge acquired by the student will be of value in the vocation which he will enter later in life.

Many of those who emphasize knowledge for its utilitarian value, however, will admit that in addition to the acquisition of factual information and special skills, education is directed also toward developing desirable attitudes, appreciations and social behaviors necessary for democratic living. If pressed, many persons will admit that what an individual feels is more important in determining what he does than what he knows. They will admit also that the “real

aim” of education is not to develop knowledge alone, but to develop those desirable ways of thinking and acting that are social in nature.

The insistence upon knowledge as a center of concern in the light of this admission is the consequence of a second belief that right behavior is the direct product of right knowledge. Thus, there are those who believe that the presentation of the achievement of the race, summarized in subjects such as history, science, and literature, is the best means of perpetuating the desired traditions, customs, and practices in the lives of succeeding generations. This belief, that virtue is the automatic outcome of knowledge, inspired Jefferson to adopt as the motto for the University of Virginia the words: “Ye shall know the truth and the truth will make you free.”

However strong these two concepts, namely knowledge for the purpose of future use and knowledge for the purpose of social behavior, each in reality is a statement of a principle that knowledge is a means to an end and not an end in itself.

Beginning with the efforts of Edward L. Thorndike designed to measure the disciplinary power of certain subjects, the second concept, that right thinking and right acting are the consequences of right knowing, has been invalidated through many experiments. It is now known that one learning product does not guarantee another. Therefore, those who operate upon the assumption that the acquisition of knowledge is sufficient to guarantee desirable attitudes and social behaviors are operating on a false assumption.

Our experience with a well-informed German people during the recent war is sufficient to warn us that desirable behavior is certainly not the by-product of technical knowledge. At the present time, threats at home and abroad to our security and hopes as individuals and as a nation originate with the well-informed rather than with the ignorant.

We are forced to the conclusion that the purpose of education cannot be achieved through the insistence upon knowledge alone. Although knowledge has some intrinsic value in that it is

not diminished by the giving, it is essentially an instrument – a means to an end and not an end in itself. Otherwise, it would be as good to learn one thing as another.

In defining the direction of growth of North Carolina College at Durham, therefore, we must look beyond knowledge as our center of concern.

Let us now consider the second proposal regarding a center of concern. It has been stated that we can discharge our obligation to society and achieve true greatness by concentrating our efforts upon developing those qualities of spirit and action which motivate men to build the kind of world in which it is good for all men to live. The key words here are “spirit” and “motivate.” The proposal is that we center our efforts upon developing the feelings or attitudes of individuals which motivate them to undertake desirable tasks and which sustain them continuously in their efforts.

There is a difference between knowledge of something and a feeling toward the things known. In a recent lecture titled “Some Thoughts on University Education,” Sir Richard Livingston of the University of Oxford emphasized this point in the statement: “It is possible to read history and get a history scholarship and an honors degree in it without divining the depths that lie beneath laws and wars, diplomacy and institution, or hearing behind the tumult and the shouting the ‘still, sad music of humanity’. ...”

The emphasis upon values in education is not new, for teachers often list human values as the expected or hoped-for outcomes of the learning experiences which they provide. Thus, they center their attention upon one thing and hope for another.

The process which is being proposed here is different from the traditional process in that values constitute the beginning point of instruction rather than the hoped-for outcome after instruction. It differs further from the usual procedure in that a deliberate effort is made to arrange learning experiences so that the learner has the opportunity to grow continuously in his

understanding and appreciation of desirable values to the end that they will condition whatever he does throughout his school life as well as his life after graduation. Through this process, the institution will attain greatness because it will live constructively in the lives of the present and future generations.

The process of designing a program of learning directed specifically toward the development of desirable attitudes is one of the most difficult tasks that an institution could undertake; yet, such a program has the greatest potentialities for meeting the needs of the world in which we live. Witness, for example, the thousands of schools in this country that claim that they are concerned with developing integrated individuals; on the other hand, look at the millions of people who are frustrated, or who have no hope, or who have no sense of direction, or who have no faith either in themselves or in others. Many of those people are not poor in material possessions; neither are they poor in terms of knowledge. Their poverty, however, is one of spirit.

I know of no undertaking that is more appropriate for the exercise of the best intelligence in this country than that of cultivating the moral strength of the people and a sense of direction based upon their devotion to desirable ideals.

Let us assume, therefore, that we are genuinely concerned that the educative process should begin with the establishment of values, that the process of learning should be centered around the values accepted, and that the effort should result in individuals with a high quality of understanding and appreciation of specific values which will motivate and sustain them in whatever they do throughout life.

If we are so concerned, then the execution of our idea would involve answering two main questions. The first question is: What value should we choose as our centers of concern? The second question is: What procedure should we follow in focusing our efforts upon developing desirable ideals?

The remainder of this presentation is devoted to a discussion of these two questions. In the discussion, however, a complete description of the process will not be attempted, for the act of finding the answers is a part of the creative process in which teachers and students should engage.

In choosing those centers of spirit or concern by which we hope to be guided, it will be necessary for us to establish certain criteria for their selection. A few criteria are proposed.

- ♦ Our guiding principles should be simple and capable of being understood and appreciated by all, regardless of differences in intellectual capacities.
- ♦ Our guiding principles should be based on universal needs of mankind and should be appropriate for guiding an individual in his humblest, as well as, his highest aspirations.
- ♦ Our guiding principles should possess depth in the sense that there are different levels at which they can be understood and appreciated.
- ♦ Our guiding principles should lend themselves to intellectual inquiry and to experimentation in living.

I should like to propose centers of concern for the North Carolina College at Durham which meet the criteria of simplicity, universality of need, and applicability to intellectual inquiry and to personal and group experimentation in living. I believe that as an institution we can discharge our obligation to society and achieve true greatness if we center our efforts upon developing three things, namely faith in good will, faith in intelligence, and faith in the democratic process. We may express our central conviction and those beliefs which we hope to develop in others by saying first, that we believe in the value of good will; second, that we believe in the obligation of each individual to act as intelligently as his abilities will permit; and third, that we believe in solving group problems through the process of democratic cooperation.

Let us consider briefly the meaning of educational implications which each of these guides may have for this college.

Good will, the first of our proposed concerns, may be defined as a feeling that others should enjoy the greatest good that we desire for ourselves.

The process of developing good will involves two major operatives. First, there is the operation upon self. A person cannot wish for himself and for others that which is truly good unless as an individual he understands and appreciates what values are greatest in his life. The development of a high quality of personal ideals, therefore, is a necessary phase of the development of good will for others. In addition to wishing others well, good will involves the readiness of a person to act in the behalf of another person. This is the second phase of operation upon self. Here we are concerned with discovering the best methods of securing for others the highest benefits of living which we desire for ourselves.

In the process of developing good will, therefore, the operation upon self involves establishing the highest possible personal ideals and developing a corresponding readiness to act in the interest of others.

The second element of good will involves an operation upon others. For the best results, good will must be a two-way process in that it operates through the interaction of two individuals or groups of similar ideals and similar dispositions to act in each other's behalf. Thus, if we assume that an individual has engaged in the process of self-operation and possesses high ideals for himself and the disposition to secure for others that which he hopes for himself, he is still faced with the problem of contributing to the development of similar attitudes in others and similar dispositions on the part of others to act in his behalf.

In the light of these two operations, the implications of good will as a center of concern in promoting learning experiences are many. A few will be mentioned.

In the process of developing personal values, the whole body of knowledge classified under the heading of social sciences may be brought to bear in questions such as the following:

What are the things for which people and nations have striven and for which they continue to strive? What are and what have been the fears, desires, and ambitions of people? To what extent, if any, do geographic, economic, social, and political conditions affect beliefs about what is good in life? What specific ideas appear to be most sustaining to people in their efforts? What do we learn from the lives of great men regarding ideals of justice, tolerance, security, freedom, and the like?

In the process of acting in the interest of others, the study of government as a process of improving group living and the study of science as means of providing greater security and healthful living enter.

In the process of developing desirable attitudes in others and their dispositions to act in our behalf, all of the theories of psychology and sociology enter as well as mathematics. We are faced here with the problem of understanding the level at which others operate. We must know their fears, their hopes, and their frustrations in order to know where to begin in producing desirable changes in their attitudes. The problem of understanding people, including ourselves, is one which is worthy of emphasis in our research efforts.

Finally, the process of getting others to act in our behalf involves a study of human beings as well as social institutions. Here we are faced with the problem of developing and proposing a series of steps which others can take on our behalf with a feeling of security while their attitudes towards us are changing.

I submit to you a theory of good will not only as the object of intellectual inquiry, but also as a principle which has great potentialities for solving the problems of war and peace. It is my firm conviction that if we as American people would devote a reasonable proportion of our inventive geniuses to the problem of developing good will of a high order that most of the economic, social, and political ills of our Nation and the world would be removed.

It must be admitted, however, that occasions will arise in which impasses are reached and that force classified under war must be used to prevent others from doing further damage to human life and spirit. It should be admitted also that those impasses are reached because of neglect in the continuous cultivation of attitudes of good will and cooperation.

Thus, if the occasion arises in which war of any kind is the lesser of two types of human suffering, the force of war should be applied regretfully and prayerfully and it should be accompanied by a much stronger campaign directed toward peace and good will. Each experience in war, therefore, should show us more clearly the need for forethought and intelligent action in order to guard against similar occurrences in the future.

The need for emphasis upon the process of developing good will is not confined to any group, race, or nation. The Negro people, however, have a special obligation to encourage the development of a high order of good will.

It is definitely known that many of the advantages which we as a minority group in America enjoy at present are the direct consequence of the development of attitudes of good will in others. An objective analysis of the techniques which we used in the past will reveal that we found it advisable in many instances to develop a disposition on the part of others to act in our behalf by deliberately encouraging an attitude that we are harmless, underprivileged, happy, and, for the most part, intellectually inferior. It should be added, however, that there were notable exceptions to this general characterization. As a consequence of the developed low order of feeling toward us, actions in our behalf have been of a corresponding low order. This is not strange, for we deliberately encouraged a feeling of charity and charity was what we received.

We are faced now with a new problem. Assuming that our ideals regarding ourselves exist at a high level and that it is our intention, through self-operation, to develop still higher

ideals, our problem now is to devise means of getting others to feel about us as we do about ourselves and to act in accordance with their new attitudes.

I believe that the quickest way to achieve a wholesome pattern of economic, political, and educational equality between any two groups is through the development of a high order of good will. Those who have rejected the principle of good will as a basis of promoting progress have, by their actions, demonstrated that their understanding of the operation of the principle is at a low level.

This college was founded on the principle of good will and it is our hope that this principle will continue to be basic to our philosophy. We are concerned essentially with promoting desirable changes in the minds of men. It is our task, therefore, to promote the operation of the principle of good will at progressively higher levels.

Faith in intelligence, the second proposed center of concern, may be defined for our purpose as a belief in the value of thinking critically about what we do in terms of the ends which we hope to achieve.

It is common knowledge that there are many individuals who seek only the satisfactions of the moment and who give very little thought to the economic insecurities and social frustrations which may come as consequences of their impulsive actions. Also, there is some evidence to support the belief that we as American people do not adhere fully to the principle of postponing action until we have had the opportunity to examine critically the ends which we hope to achieve.

One might be inclined to believe that certainly teachers in institutions of higher learning are united on what they hope to accomplish through their institutional efforts and that there is a high degree of consistency between the means which these teachers employ and the ends which they hope to achieve. One might be inclined to believe further that considerable attention is paid

in colleges to the development of students' abilities to think critically about their goals and to plan their actions in terms of examined purposes.

This, however, is not the case. Surveys of college practices indicate that teachers and administrators devote very little attention to the process of establishing agreements regarding what they hope to accomplish through their efforts. Also, in many instances, no deliberate efforts are made to help students grow in their abilities to plan their actions in terms of individual purposes which have been critically examined.

The thesis presented here in simple terms is that we would do well as an institution to establish as one center of our concern the feeling that it is good for us as teachers and as students, first, to understand clearly what we want to do, second to understand why we want to do it, and third, to understand what we must do in order to achieve our purposes. The first two elements involving "what" and "why" are related specifically to a critical examination of ends to be achieved. The third element is related to the process of developing means which are consistent with desired ends.

Many of the desirable consequences of this philosophy of acting intelligently regarding ends and means are obvious. First, our efficiency as an institution can be increased through the process, in that a greater degree of concentration of efforts is possible through our understanding of common ends and means.

Second, the psychological effect upon the faculty is good. Where there is a desirable unity of purpose, one can operate with a feeling of security and with the feeling that one's efforts will be appreciated.

Third, the effect upon the student is good. In any enterprise in which a student engages, there is a high degree of certainty that he will increase his effort to achieve when he understands

and appreciates specifically what is to be done, why it should be done, and how it can be accomplished.

In addition to the values mentioned, the application of the process of critical thinking to many aspects of one's personal development, particularly to the development of one's ability to engage in scientific research, is well known.

The application of the process to the problem of developing desirable relations between human beings, however, is less well known and deserves some consideration. One example, therefore, will be presented in order to demonstrate the close relationship between the process of developing good will between individuals and the process of exploring ends and means.

Let us assume that learning experiences have been provided sufficient to impress upon the student that an act cannot be considered good unless it produces the end desired. For example, if we are concerned with getting others to take a definite course of action which may be social, economic, political, or educational, our action should produce the desired consequences and not some other end. Unless we go further in the development of this process, however, there is a danger that the learner may conclude that the ends desired justify the means and that any means may be used if the specific and desired is achieved. This conclusion would be the result of a limited understanding of desirable ends.

A more critical examination of the desired purposes, when an effort is being made to get others to take a specific course of action, will reveal that the means which we employ to get others to act should be adapted to produce two results rather than one.

First, what we do should guarantee that others will take specific action which we desire. Second, what we do should also guarantee that the action should be taken willingly by others and not as a result of compulsion.

It is quite possible to get another person to act in a certain way but at the same time through our efforts develop in him a resentment which will manifest itself in undesirable ways. Our deeper understanding of means and ends, therefore, will lead us to conclude that we have devised desirable means of getting others to act when what we do produces the specific act on the part of others and at the same time develops a disposition on the part of others to act favorably on subsequent occasions.

In promoting social changes, therefore, that method is intelligent which not only produces the desired change, but also which contributes to the continuous development of a high order of good will. This inclusion of these two ends in our planning is the only way that we can guarantee that the specific benefit which we desire will endure.

The practice of employing means to achieve desired ends begins at birth and is a part of the continuous process of living. Our purpose as an institution, therefore, should be to assist individuals and groups in thinking critically about what they do in terms of what they hope to accomplish.

Democratic cooperation as a third proposed center of our concern will require only a brief treatment in view of the fact that the promotion of growth of individuals in democratic living is one of the established objectives of American education.

Usually, discussions of democratic cooperation begin with the presentation of beliefs regarding equality. For our purposes, however, it is appropriate to begin with a presentation of our beliefs and practices regarding differences and then proceed to a definition of our concept of equality.

The recognition of individual differences between students is basic to the projection of any institutional program. It is known, for example, that students differ from each other in their

abilities and talents, in their aptitudes and interests, in their ambitions, and in a variety of other ways.

One of the initial steps which we take in the interest of the student, therefore, is directed toward discovering these differences for the purpose of assisting each student in selecting immediate and remote interests in life which are appropriate to his abilities and aptitudes. Thus, with some knowledge of the student's potentials for growth, the necessary resources of the institution are utilized in facilitating the progress of the student toward his appropriate goal.

The outcome of this emphasis upon specialization, excluding, of course, the common understandings promoted through the learnings in the area of general education, is that the learners, in many respects, are more different from each other at the end of their educational experiences than they were at the beginning. Each person, for example, acquires certain appreciations, understandings, and accompanying skills which are practically unknown to some other persons.

One explanation for this emphasis upon individual differences is that the work of the modern world has to be done by individuals with specialized understandings, appreciations, and skills, for example, teachers, physicians, dentists, lawyers, social workers, librarians, economists, and scientists.

There are two other answers, however, which are more fundamental to our American way of life and which are related specifically to our beliefs concerning equality.

First, we believe in the fundamental dignity and worth of every individual. Because of this appreciation for the individual, we are obligated to assist him in every way possible in the optimum development and use of his abilities and talents. Our concept of equality enters here in that we do not differentiate between individuals in our concern for their growth and development. Our concern for the optimum growth of all individuals, therefore, is equal.

Thus, on the one hand, we exert every possible effort to arrange facilities and services favorable to the growth of the individual; on the other hand, we utilize all the intelligence and good will at our disposal to encourage society to provide all the means that are necessary for the fullest possible realization of its ideal for the individual.

Our second belief which motivates us to promote the optimum development of each individual is related to the individual's obligation to society. We believe that every person should feel obligated to use his abilities and talents for the common good.

As we see it, the education provided by the State should operate on the basis of a contractual agreement between the student and the State. On the one hand, the State agrees to provide the services and facilities necessary for the optimum development of the student's abilities; on the other hand, the student agrees to take every possible advantage of the opportunity to develop in a desirable direction. Following the completion of his school experiences, the student further agrees to use his developed abilities and talents for the common good.

Our concept of equality enters here in that individuals may have equal concerns for the well being of all regardless of the differences which may exist in their capacities to contribute.

Our beliefs regarding individual differences and equality which sustain us in what we do for students should also motivate us to assist the student in developing ideals and practices similar to ours.

We should be concerned, therefore, that the student develops a feeling that all people should have the opportunity to live healthfully and to exercise to the fullest extent their abilities and talents. We should be concerned further that the student develops a feeling of his obligation as a member of society to provide the facilities and services necessary for the realization of his ideals for himself and for others.

In order to assist the student in learning to fulfill effectively his obligation to others, we should place special emphasis upon developing his ability to work with others for the common good by providing directed experiences in democratic living.

There are definitions of democratic cooperation, but for the purpose of guiding the student, it may be defined as the process by which every individual willingly utilizes his abilities and talents in working with others for the common good.

Since learning to cooperate democratically is a developmental process in which one progresses through different levels of understanding and appreciation, opportunities should be provided for the students to grow in their capacities to share with others,

- ◆ In proposing and deciding upon courses of action which are worthwhile for the group to undertake,
- ◆ In planning what needs to be done to achieve desired group purposes, and
- ◆ In assuming responsibility for the success of group enterprise by contributing according to one's abilities and talents.

The disposition to operate on the basis of good will and to act as intelligently as possible is inherent in the process.

Operating upon the assumption that learning to live democratically is promoted best through directed experiences in democratic living, our College in one sense should become a laboratory in which experiences are provided which enable the individual to grow in his knowledge and appreciation that his personal success and happiness is identified with the well being of the group with which he is associated and in his disposition and ability to be guided in what he does by the probable effects of his action upon the good fortune of others.

In another sense, our institution should be an experimental community in which freedom from the pressure of adult life offers the opportunity to develop and to test under controlled conditions certain techniques designed to improve attitudes and behaviors.

In concluding this discussion of the course which we should take in promoting the growth and development of the North Carolina College at Durham, I have emphasized that we can discharge our obligation to society and achieve true greatness by centering our efforts upon developing three sources of strength in men, namely, faith in good will, faith in intelligence, and faith in the democratic process.

I know that many persons will feel that a fourth area of concern should consist of a religious emphasis directed toward assisting individuals in developing the will to follow through upon ethical decisions. This proposal would be accepted. However, it is realized that this obligation is one which we share with the Church and other religious institutions.

I know too that we dream of having here a great university equal to other great universities in the country in terms of emphasis upon professional education, the advancement of knowledge, and the general education of leading citizens. We have a right to our dream and, with the help of our friends, we should work unceasingly for its realization. Such a dream, however, is a vision of means and not of the ends to be achieved.

To catch a vision of our real purpose, we must realize that the state of the world has been, and always will be, a reflection of the state of mind or spirit of the people in it. Our concern for a better world, therefore, should be directed toward developing the spirit of man reinforced by intellectual competence and skill in democratic action.