

# "Castles in a Bog"

## Great university systems flourish where children fare poorly

By Gordon K. Davies



YOU PROBABLY DID NOT hear this at recent commencement ceremonies: Colleges and universities tend to take credit for much of the good that occurs in a society but to remain shockingly oblivious to the greatest human follies and catastrophes. Although perhaps not deliberate, this posture has allowed institutions of higher education to lay claim to the best and avoid blame for the bad. But the rapid shift to a more open market in which many purveyors of educational services vie for student-customers has revealed this behavior to be self serving.

As I was preparing to begin the work of coordinating higher education reform in Kentucky, I came across a summary of "Kids Count," an annual report prepared by the Children's Defense Fund with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. In it, I discovered that Kentucky ranked 40th among the states in the general well-being of its children, according to commonsense measures like the percentages of children living in poverty, having abnormally low weights at birth, dying before age two, and being born to unwed teenage mothers.

Surely, I thought, if this reform is successful, it will improve the condition of children in Kentucky. But, to my surprise, I noted that a state acknowledged to have one of the best university systems in the nation ranked just above Kentucky in "Kids Count." I realized that it is possible for a state to build a great system of higher education without improving the condition of its children. Indeed, some respected state universities may have been built at the expense of the poor, whose needs are not met. They are like castles in a bog, I thought.

There are two Kentuckys—one of the haves and the other of the have-nots—just as there are two Californias, North Carolinas, New Yorks and Floridas. The percentages differ, but the social reality is basically the same. In many states with eminent public universities, substantial portions of the population live desperate, dead-end lives: uneducated, unhealthy, and unprepared for the nimble but hard-hearted economy that will shape the destiny of our children and grandchildren.

....Kentucky has attracted national attention during this decade for its public-school reforms. Now, as we seek to create better jobs and the skilled and knowledgeable people to fill them, we have taken on the challenge of improving higher education. We are well below the national averages in enrolling and graduating students.

....We intend to do much better. Because education beyond high school has become necessary for women and men to participate in society and achieve some measure of economic self-sufficiency, we cannot build great universities as if kids do not count.

By 2020, we want to have nationally eminent universities and a model system of postsecondary education. We want a per-capita income that is at least at the national average. But if we have done this and still there are two Kentuckys, we shall have failed. Or better, we shall not yet have been successful.

Higher education by itself cannot improve the quality of lives in Kentucky or any other state. The connections between causes and effects in solving social problems are both difficult to discern and exceedingly complex. Many institutions, both governmental and private, have to align their efforts before even small improvements can be achieved.

Even though the causal linkages are unclear, correlations are undeniable. Better-educated women experience healthier pregnancies and bear healthier children. The general level of health increases along with education, as do civic involvement, support for the arts, and per-capita income.

In his 1876 inaugural address, Daniel Coit Gilman, the founding president of Johns Hopkins University, asserted that the establishment of great research universities would lead to "less misery among the poor, less ignorance in the schools, less bigotry in the temple, less suffering in the hospital, less fraud in business, less folly in politics."

We may forgive Gilman his heady optimism. But read as a statement of moral imperative rather than as a prediction, his words are compelling. Universities should take leading roles in organizing our social institutions to address the persistent and growing gap between rich and poor. Why?

First, almost all of the nation's community leaders, elected officials, and professionals are prepared for their work by colleges and universities. Higher education is the training camp for the haves.

Second, although most university presidents today shudder at Gilman's moral imperative—it complicates the fundraising, lobbying and athletic entertainments that occupy much of their time—higher-education institutions have embraced an authoritative stance as preservers and transmitters of the best that has been thought and said. They are home to thoughtful critics of society. Their faculties remember where we have been and understand the current dimensions of our human predicament better than other institutions.

The public colleges and universities of our nation serve more than 80 percent of the Americans enrolled in higher education. Governors and state legislatures are demanding that these institutions be accountable for their performance. They are trying to tie funding to results.

Their efforts do not go far enough. States should set tougher accountability standards than enrollment, retention and graduation rates. They should require their public universities, colleges, and community and technical colleges to demonstrate that they make a difference in how well children live, in the vitality of communities and the civic engagement of their residents, in the strength of the economy, and in a sustainable environment. They should be asked to demonstrate—not proclaim—that they contribute to public health in the broadest sense.

If they cannot show that they make a difference, their funding should not continue to increase. Instead, states should invest more in things that might help: roads, water quality, public schools and for-profit technical training, for example.

Writing in 1864, Matthew Arnold, one of England's leading poets and the greatest literary critic of his time, expressed bewilderment that two eminent men had declared England was living in a golden age of "unrivalled happiness." Immediately thereafter, Arnold wrote, he stumbled upon a lurid newspaper account of a homeless and destitute young woman named Wragg who, in despair, had fled from a workhouse and strangled her illegitimate child. "Wragg is in custody," the news account concluded.

Arnold was no political radical. He had been elected to the Chair of Poetry at Oxford. He was the son of a famous headmaster of Eton. But he earned his living as an inspector who traveled a circuit of English schools and wrote reports on their adequacy. He had come to believe firmly in the necessity of education for all children, and he argued for it, mostly in vain, to the end of his life.

What Arnold sensed was a total disconnection between the prosperity of some and the abject poverty of others. Whenever some industrialist or member of government trumpeted the great virtues of the age, Arnold suggested, someone else should at least murmur, "Wragg is in custody."

A great university system in a society whose children fare badly is a failure. If Kentucky creates colleges and universities that become the envy of the nation, but its kids still do not count, we, too, will have failed. When the popular magazine rankings announce the supposed "best" among the nation's colleges and universities in the year 2000, I hope to hear someone murmur, "Wragg is in custody." Maybe even during a graduation address.

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