

# The President's Diversity

Thomas Martin

*Thomas Martin is a professor of philosophy at the University of Nebraska at Kearney.*

**A**s we stand at the threshold of a new millennium, we, as the educators of the University of Nebraska, must stand ready to incorporate new ideas and concepts that are vital to the development of our nation as it continues its leadership in an ever-developing global economy. We must take stock of what makes us a great state and develop those areas that have yet to receive our full commitment, both as an institution, and as individuals. One of the most important of these areas has to do with multiculturalism and diversity.

We, the people of the State of Nebraska, are a mosaic of ethnicities, languages, and lifestyles. We live in an age when we must treat the various cultures and languages in our state as assets, not as weaknesses. At this point in our history, we would do a great disservice to our future generations if we were to encourage people to think that knowing only one culture and speaking only one language would be enough to remain competitive in an age when technology and the internet have brought us all closer together as a world-wide family. . .

We at the University of Nebraska will strive to:

Support programs that explore and honor experiences, perspectives and contributions of Nebraska's increasingly diverse communities.

Create truly diverse communities of faculty and staff that reflect both our multicultural society and individual differences and achieve among faculty and staff representative numbers of groups historically denied equal access because of race and gender. . .

We are the University of Nebraska. As the population of our state develops, we must be prepared to change to better meet the needs and address the issues of our increasingly diverse communities. This is not a utopian world, and we must understand that we will be faced with challenges from those who would rather look backward than forward.

However, we must remember that what transpires in the next decade, in the next century, and in the next millennium will depend on the seeds of equality, justice, and opportunity that we plant today.

These goals are in keeping with Board of Regents Policy Goals Pertaining to Equity for People of Color which were originally issued February 1993 and re-confirmed February 1997 and with LB 389-1997.

In reading these words of the president of the University of Nebraska, L. Dennis Smith, I was reminded of the elementary school my daughters attended in Kearney, Nebraska. Central Elementary is a classical structure complete with columns, arches, high ceilings, an auditorium and oak trim throughout. When approaching this school one is greeted by two ideas inscribed in the upper corners

of the building: “A Taste for All Things Beautiful is a Taste for all that is Good” and, “Let Us Have Faith That Right Makes Might.” In the center of the building there is auditorium and over the stage in raised letters are the ideas: “Knowledge is Power” and “Wisdom is Light.” This building is a testimony from our ancestors whose vision of education was the attainment of the power to see Truth and Beauty, coupled with the faith to understand right is might.

But this is an old idea of education that suggests the cultivation of a student’s soul is necessary to move beyond what is commonly known as worldly desires into being a cultured member of a nation, and one who can see that, contrary to the way of the world in which might makes right, it is right that makes might.

Anyone who has the beginning of a classical education knows that the former statement belongs to Thrasymachus who states in Plato’s *Republic* that, justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger. Socrates tries to refute with the latter statement; leading all the participants in the dialogue, if they have been persuaded by Socrates,

. . . [to] believe that the soul is immortal and [to become] able to endure every evil and every good, and we’ll always hold to the upward path, practicing justice with reason in every way.

Students of American history might know that Abraham Lincoln reverses Thrasymachus’ idea in his address at Cooper Union, New York, on February 27, 1860, when he says, “Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith let us to the end dare to do our duty as we understand it.”

Ideas move through the ages and have a life of their own.

President Smith’s statement on diversity obviously has been crafted to satisfy the Board of Regents Policy Goals Pertaining to Equity for People of Color. A university is not established to create a “mosaic of ethnicities, languages, and lifestyles” or “people of color.” A university is established to create colorful people. Universities since their inception in the Middle Ages when the areas of study were Theology, Medicine, Law and Philosophy, have concentrated on the moral and intellectual development of their students to serve as instruments in governing and caring for the spiritual and material needs of man. However, universities like man have a long and checkered past. At their best, universities are the places where qualified students come to study the ideas of their intellectual and artistic ancestors in order to work their souls into the shape necessary to aid in the creation of a world in which right makes might. At their worst, universities are places where unqualified and qualified students alike come to forsake ideals as their minds are bent to the ideologies whose truths are mandated by the power of the state at that time. The universities of Russia and Germany under Soviet and Nazi governments readily come to mind.

However, the failure of universities under obviously repressive forms of government is not the only way a university can fail. Imagine for a moment if courses of study and the faculties of universities were selected as our politicians are elected in November. Let the professors of Art, Business, Biology, Classics,

Chemistry, Computer Science, Criminal Justice, Geography, History, Industrial Technology, Journalism, Mathematics, Languages, Music, Philosophy, Physical Education, Physics, Political Science, Psychology, Social Work, Theater, etc. campaign for their positions and be responsible for raising their own funds to publicize their various disciplines and courses of study.

What promises would the professors have to make in order to secure contributions from their constituents in the private sector? Which disciplines would the public and private sector be willing to fund? How would professors convince the general public to study Geometry or Calculus, or a professor of English convince potential contributors of the necessity of reading literature?

Undoubtedly the end of the university as a place of the higher goods of the soul would be transformed to meet the baser desires of the highest bidder. The soul of the university would bow to the will of its benefactors or the public action committee which funds it.

While President Smith is quick to point out that

... we would do a great disservice to our future generations if we were to encourage people to think that knowing only one culture and speaking only one language would be enough to remain competitive in an age when technology and the internet have brought us all closer together as a world-wide family.

He is wrong to think that most people even know one language and only one culture, especially now that students are wired to the internet and the wonders of interactive computers and television. At my university students are only required to take one history course and one literature course to satisfy their general studies requirement. This is hardly sufficient for knowing the language and history of even one culture: their own.

A university, like my daughters' elementary school, is a culture of the intellect, through the development of an orderly and principled mind. This cultivation of the intellect is open to everyone who is qualified to enter a university regardless of "ethnicities" or "lifestyles." In this respect university admission policies are more liberal than any of its athletic teams, which discriminate by ability and dismiss anyone who does not measure up to their standards. Thus, university presidents will not issue a statement of diversity regarding the equal ethnic representation amongst the football, basketball, or volleyball players. Even the legislators of state government know better than to mandate a quota system for People of Color on athletic teams, such that the ethnicities of all the players be a proportional representation of America's population.

President Smith's vision of the ends of diversity is futuristic and completely cut off from its past. This is readily seen when he claims that the "seeds of equality, justice, and opportunity that we plant today" will secure America's place of leadership "in an ever-developing global economy."

The seeds of "equality, justice, and opportunity" were planted long ago by hands much larger than ours. The idea of a world-wide family is a half-truth. That

man is a member of a world-wide family is a religious idea. A world-wide family must have a father and a mother. The university began in the Western world with God as its father and the Church as its mother. All of its students and faculty were members of the same family on their pilgrimage through the world. A common inscription over a scriptorium or monastic library succinctly summarizes this, *Tota Bibliotheca unus liber est, in capite velatus, in fine manifestus* (The whole Library is one book, in the beginning veiled, in the end manifest).

It is further presumptuous to think that the end of our university is to achieve America's place of leadership in a ever-developing global economy. The nations of the world have not elected America to be its leader. It may as easily be said of America that its "ever-developing global economy" is a statement about its citizens waistlines. We are not developing because we have a clear idea of what the future will bring; however, we are expanding in that we are becoming fat.

President Smith does caution that in our "ever-developing global economy," we will be "faced with challenges from those who would rather look backward than forward." However, it is prudent, since no one has gone into the future, to pay attention to our elders.

John Newman, himself a university president, in his work *The Idea of University*, written in 1852, addresses the ends of a university,

Certainly a liberal education does manifest itself in a courtesy, propriety, and polish of word and action, which is beautiful in itself, and acceptable to others; but it does much more. It brings the mind into form—for the mind is like the body. Boys outgrow their shape and their strength; their limbs have to be knit together, and their constitution needs tone. Mistaking animal spirits for vigor, and over confident in their health, ignorant what they can bear and how to manage themselves, they are immoderate and extravagant, and fall into sharp sicknesses. This is an emblem of their minds; at first they have no principles laid down within them as a foundation for the intellect to build upon; they have no discriminating convictions, and no grasp of consequences. And therefore they talk at random, if they talk much, and cannot help being flippant, or what is emphatically called "young." They are merely dazzled by phenomena, instead of perceiving things as they are.

This latter, perceiving things as they are, is the end of higher education which goes beyond things as they appear and being "merely dazzled by phenomena." This passage of Newman's echoes Aristotle, who knew that the young are not equipped to be students of politics, the science that directs man to the highest good of his soul, because they follow emotion instead of what is noble and just. Youth, for Aristotle, was not a matter of years but a matter of character. Youth is led by emotions; thus it is possible to be old and immature. Politics for Aristotle was the master science, the soul-craft which focused upon the highest good of man, a final good, a good in and of itself. Aristotle's end of man easily fits into the end of the first universities, founded for the greater glory of God, who is the source and end of man's being.

With the current “March Madness” of the NCAA basketball tournament it is easy to see vigor, confidence, and health of youth at play. But these young men and women of March will outgrow their shape, strength, and over-confidence in their health as they make their way in the world. I suspect most of the basketball players do not understand that their minds are potentially stronger than their bodies. How will these young people manage themselves outside the care of the coaches and trainers who oversee their lives during eligibility? In the world, when they are no longer human resources, will the necessary principles have been laid down within them as a foundation for their intellects to build upon. Will they have convictions and be able to discriminate and grasp the consequences of their actions.

In conclusion, President Smith’s statement, that the people of Nebraska are like a mosaic depicts man as being broken into pieces and then reassembled into a picture of one people in a global economy, members of a world-wide family held together by technology and the internet. It is a picture of man created in the image of man. In effect, what the President is proposing is Christianity, the unity of diverse people into one family without Christ. This vision is not a spiritual union, but one in which the advancements of technology and man’s common want of material goods unites him to the global village via internet. It is the tower of Babel. The prayer has moved from, Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come thy will be done. . . to, Our Multi-national Corporations which art in cyber-space, open thy stores and satisfy our desires.

Interestingly, G. K. Chesterton, writing in 1910, noted

The last few decades have been marked by a special cultivation of the romance of the future. We seem to have made up our minds to misunderstand what has happened; and we turn, with a sort of relief to stating, what will happen? Which is apparently much easier . . . The modern mind is forced towards the future by a certain sense of fatigue, not unmixed with terror, with which it regards the past. It is propelled towards the coming time; it is, in the exact words of the popular phrase, knocked into the middle of next week. And the goad which drives it on thus eagerly is not an affection for futurity. Futurity does not exist, because it is still future. Rather it is fear of the past; a fear not merely of the evil in the past, but of the good in the past also.

Even the romance of the future is an old idea. And so it goes.   Ω