

# EDUCATIONAL RECORD

Special Annual  
Meeting Issue

**The Magazine  
of Higher  
Education**  
*Fall 1992*

*Reality and Regeneration*  
**Today's Problems,  
Tomorrow's Solutions**





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UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION:

# Seeking the Golden Mean

MYLES BRAND

**A**merica's universities and colleges come in many shapes and sizes. But virtually all of our institutions share one key feature: we educate undergraduates, and we want to do so as well as we possibly can.

Given this priority, it is no wonder that higher educators wince at the popularly held perception that undergraduate education has slipped in relative importance to other campus missions. While there is a tendency to exaggerate the extent of this decline, there is little doubt that undergraduate education no longer possesses its old cachet. This is something we need to change, and soon.

The culprit, it has become fashionable to argue, is the conflict between a faculty member's devotion to undergraduate education and his or her commitment to scholarly research or creative activity. But this explanation is overly simplistic. For example, it overlooks the fact that when properly aligned, serious research and undergraduate education are mutually supportive, highly compatible activities. It is desirable to do both,

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*Myles Brand is president of the University of Oregon.*





and it is possible to do both well; indeed, many of our best scholar-researchers also are among our best scholar-teachers.

Does this mean that all is in sync in the relative emphasis accorded to research and undergraduate teaching? Not so, unfortunately. But why this is so, and what to do about it, are more subtle – and more complicated – questions than the critics would have us believe. It is not the enterprises of teaching and research that are in conflict. Rather, I suggest, it is how we perceive and value these activities, and reinforcing this, how we have structured our institutions to reflect these attitudes by under-valuing and under-rewarding undergraduate education.

Attacking university-based research neither helps attain the goal of revitalizing American undergraduate education nor serves the interests of higher education and society at large – both of which reap enormous, indispensable benefits from research. Rather, we need to take a constructive approach aimed at establishing a balance between undergraduate education and the other important – and compatible – parts of higher education's mission, especially research. We need to cultivate what Aristotle called the Golden Mean: the ability, as Horace later described it, to avoid “both the poverty of a hovel and the envy of a palace.” I believe that emphasizing an appreciation of this mean, by bringing the values and rewards associated with research and instruction into better alignment, can increase our chances for successfully revitalizing U.S. undergraduate education.

How did the current imbalance come about, and how can it be corrected? One cannot begin to answer these questions without examining the recent history of undergraduate education reform in this country.

### **Roots of change**

Every generation of scholars and university administrators feels a need to reexamine the curriculum. This is always a difficult and contentious process – one that rivals moving a graveyard. Countless commissions have periodically detailed the need for change, in turn leading several major educational professional organizations to expend considerable effort identifying ways to achieve worthwhile reforms. In the 1950s and 1960s, general education curricula typically consisted of reasonably common cores of both skill and content courses. At many institutions, the choice of courses was limited, and students generally followed a coherent track in pursuit of their degrees. But in the Vietnam War era, all this changed. The cry was for more relevance in curricula, along with more choice in course offerings. Students



found that it was easier to empower themselves and exert influence on university course content and requirements than on many broader social and political goals.

Higher education responded to the need for change by moving from a core to a distribution model of coursework. Students no longer had to take a required list of courses, but were free to choose among courses in a variety of categories. It was during this era, for example, that many institutions abandoned foreign language requirements. At the same time, schools became internally competitive, with departments vying for student credit hours by offering attractive courses, thinking that this would attract additional resources. Although resources tended *not* to follow enrollment, individual departments continued the entrepreneurial effort; the result was a smorgasbord of courses.

The latest round of reform began about a decade ago, when it became clear that U.S. undergraduate education needed a fresh look. While the distribution model continued to prevail, attempts arose to delimit permissiveness in general education coursework. Without completely reverting to the way things had been (before the student protest days), course offerings gradually became more coherent. Some required courses even reemerged, including language requirements.

The current generation of education reformers appears to have finished most of its work. Undergraduate curriculum reform has slowed to a trickle, perhaps because it has reached the end of its cycle. With the important exception of the present search on campuses nationwide for a workable approach to multicultural and international coursework, I believe we have seen

most of the movement for some time to come.

The major issue facing undergraduate education today has moved from curriculum change to institutional change. What institutional changes, in terms of mission, organization, and structure, are necessary to revitalize undergraduate education? What can and should be done to alter support and reward structures, and especially

**T**he major issue facing undergraduate education today has moved from curriculum change to institutional change.

the underlying institutional culture, to reassert the importance of the undergraduate mission? How can we reemphasize undergraduate education to improve quality, without degrading or backing off from the university's commitment to the accumulation of new knowledge? And how can we respond to the concerns of legislators and the public that overemphasis on research erodes not only the *quality* of instruction, but also the ability to provide an adequate *quantity* of instruction?

### **Ascendancy of research**

As noted, the fundamental challenge facing U.S. higher education today with respect to undergraduate education is to reassert the balance among various institutional missions, particularly at large research universities.

Classroom instruction always has been the heart and soul of higher education. But with the leadership of Johns Hopkins University and some other schools in the last century, and continuing at an accelerated pace at many more schools today, research has become a major and essential player in the missions of most higher education institutions.

The ascendancy of research as an educational mission accelerated during World War II, when many research universities played a prominent role in the war effort. Research on the atomic bomb, for instance, involved many of the best academic physical scientists of the day, with some of the first experimentation taking place at the University of Chicago. Massachusetts Institute of Technology played a key role in the development of radar. Through such activities, the federal government began investing heavily in university research, first through the Office of Naval Research, and later through the National Science Foundation and other agencies. Eventually, the range of federally supported activities broadened to include the humanities and the arts.

There is no question that the system of federal support for research that has evolved over the years – and that now has been joined by support from a number of major private foundations – generates many real and substantial benefits for society. This system has spawned a national research consortium that is both the envy and the powerhouse of the world. Federally supported research also helps support graduate education and has led to countless advances in human knowledge. As a result of this ongoing investment, international students cannot get enough of what American higher education



has to offer. Accordingly, compared with the automobile industry, for instance, which had a negative balance of payments of about \$45 billion in 1990, U.S. higher education generated a positive balance of payments that same year of about \$5 billion.

Thus, no sane person would suggest throttling the engine of university-based research. But the emphasis on university research, over time, has also had an unbalancing effect. Keen competition for research dollars and the professional recognition attached to success in accruing grants and publishing research results unfortunately has led some universities to overemphasize this aspect of their mission. University administrators, including trustees, know that faculty recognition through research brings not only dollars to campus, but also prestige, which attracts prospective students, public and legislative support, and all the rest. Not surprisingly, then, extensive internal incentives and rewards exist to promote the preeminence of research.

### **Other influences**

In addition to research, many universities also have the mission of engaging in community and public service. In the United States, the Morrill Act of 1862, which created land-grant institutions, was the single most important step taken to link the educational research missions of universities with the needs of the general public, particularly in agriculture, engineering, and related technical fields. Today, basic public service arising from campus-based research in these and many other fields remains an important focus on many campuses.

Not only are there strong internal and external pulls on the university to engage in research, but

the task of providing quality undergraduate education has become more difficult because of the increased numbers of students seeking higher education. Following World War II, the G.I. Bill made it possible for many men (and some women) to attend college at federal expense. In recent years, changing workforce needs and continued movement from a resource economy to one that emphasizes high-level service and information have encouraged more students to seek a university education.

Today, more than half of all high school graduates seek post-secondary education; half of these students apply to four-year colleges or universities. With limited resources — particularly in terms of personnel — universities find themselves confronted with the three-part mission of continuing to compete for research dollars and prestige, meeting their public service commitments, and educating a significant portion of the population.

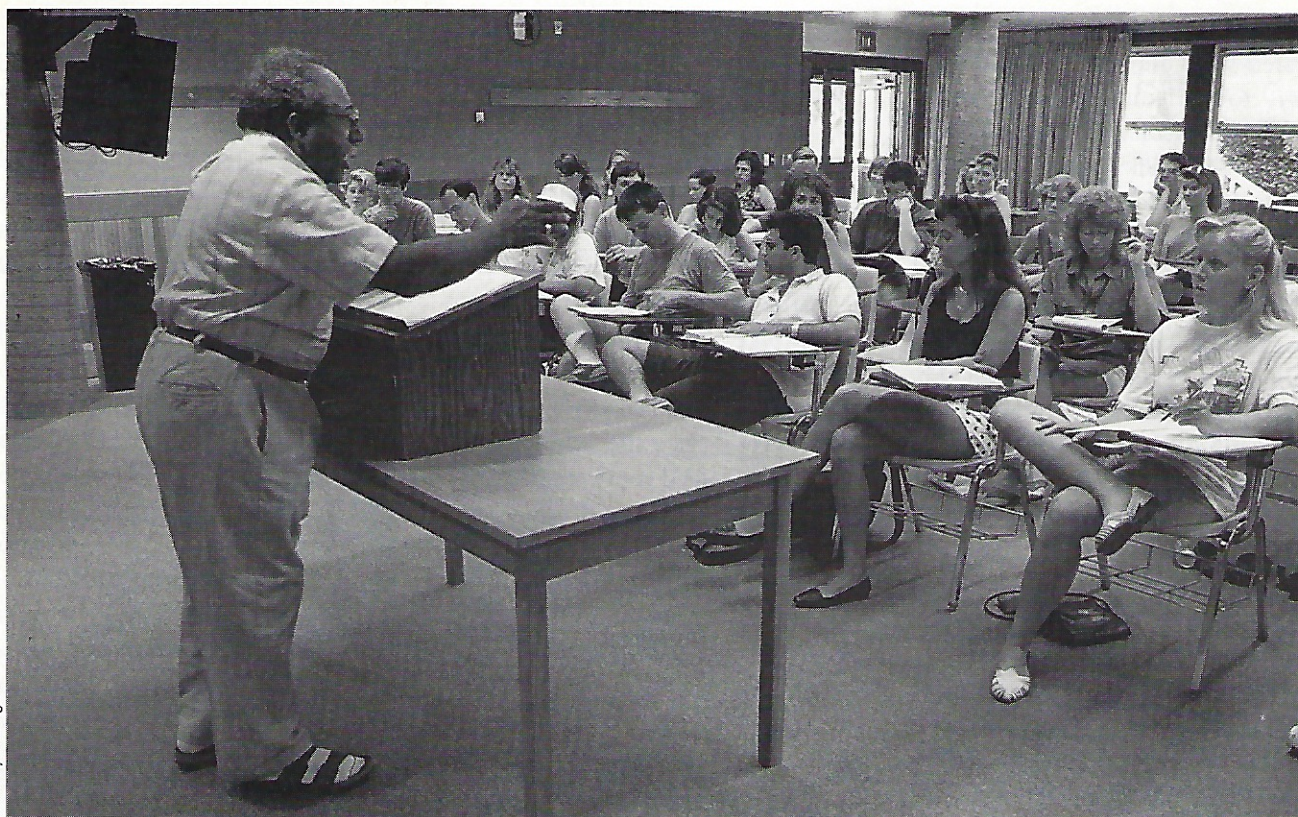
Clearly, it fits our democratic ideals to give as many people as possible the opportunity to attain the lifelong benefits, both material and intellectual, that accrue from a college education. But given fiscal realities, the capacity of universities to meet all aspects of their missions is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain.

### **Searching for models**

The search for ways to reemphasize high-quality undergraduate education reveals that American higher education has few models of excellence. Major research universities are close to being the singular model of aspiration for all. True, there are small liberal arts colleges, urban universities, engineering and technical schools, and community colleges that differ substantially from the large research university.

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"[T]he less time one spends generating publications that are rarely read or cited, or engaging in peer review of such publications, the more time one should have for teaching and related activities."

But in one way or another, the principal features of the research university have left their mark on all of American higher education.

As an example, even at liberal arts colleges and urban universities with missions that focus primarily on undergraduate education or service to urban communities, the criteria for promotion and tenure often emphasize research publications. This wholesale adoption of standards appropriate to one kind of institution seems inappropriate in the case of small state colleges, for example. Rather than focusing on their instructional missions with some complementary research and public service, many such institutions stress research productivity as a primary consideration for faculty advancement.

So far, most community colleges have resisted the research university model in matters of promotion and tenure. But even this could change: already we see

the beginnings of a trend in which community colleges offer baccalaureate degrees; emulating research universities in their reward and incentive structures cannot be far behind.

Some public and private institutions are beginning to explore the concept of emphasizing quality over quantity in publications, allowing consideration of only a limited number of publications for promotion and tenure decisions. This idea appears to have both intellectual and practical merit: chiefly, the less time one spends generating publications that are rarely read or cited, or engaging in peer review of such publications, the more time one should have for teaching and related activities.

#### **Disciplinary vs. institutional identification**

Undergraduate education has been deemphasized for another reason: faculty attitudes resulting from



overprofessionalization of the disciplines. The origins of this are many, including the fact that many faculty pledge their primary allegiance to their disciplinary colleagues not only across the nation, but world-wide. For example, as an academic philosopher, I am encouraged by the academic culture to seek my self-esteem from philosophers at other academic institutions, rather than from colleagues in various disciplines at my home university. My prestige in the field is tied to the professional views that others have of my research, based upon publication outlets, book titles, research grants, conference appearances, and so on. This prestige can be traded for mobility within the institution, for salary raises, and for institutional support. A faculty member who has high standing within his or her academic peer group nationally is highly marketable and valued; one who lacks this standing concomitantly lacks much of the ability to accrue institutional support, promotion, and financial rewards, and has less mobility in the job market.

One consequence of allegiance to national disciplinary peer groups is a lack of reliance on local peers. If one derives his or her professional self-esteem from a national peer group, then being well regarded by one's local colleagues plays, at best, a secondary role. Commitment to undergraduate education, however, generally requires that one's effort be exerted within a local environment. This commitment is rarely noticed nationally, and usually not within the disciplinary professional peer groups. When local affiliation gives way to national affiliation, commitment to undergraduate education erodes, too. Undergraduate education essentially involves long hours and energy commitments with

members of the local academic community – primarily, of course, with students. While most faculty take their teaching very seriously, most know, too, that this may not be their best source for rewards and prestige.

Another effect of stronger allegiance to national peer groups is a tendency toward lack of commitment to one's home institution. Many affected faculty – although certainly not all – remove themselves from essential matters of governance at their home institutions. These are not faculty who, once tenured, have taken up gardening or photography; rather, they are highly productive, hard-working individuals who give priority to professional contacts and activities in the national arena rather than on campus. As a result, their institutions suffer; some faculty members with the most to offer fail to be committed locally or to take the time to promote the well-being of their own institutions.

The nature of graduate education tends to reinforce and perpetuate this professionalization of the disciplines. Graduate education is, in part, a socialization process. Ph.D. candidates soon learn the norms and expectations of their fields. Here, the wit and wisdom of one's mentors become part of one's background. I wonder how many times a senior professor took a promising graduate student aside and said something like the following:

Let me tell you how to succeed. When you begin teaching, try to keep your repertoire of courses small, and repeat them often. That way, you will minimize preparation. Most of all, focus on your research. If you turn out three papers a year [or whatever is appropriate to the field], you will be in a good position for

tenure, and that is the immediate goal. Take time off as much as possible for research and participate in national conferences and networking.

No doubt, such advice is well meaning. But it also perpetuates affiliation with national disciplinary peer groups and leads away from commitment to undergraduate education. We are now reaping the consequences of faculty who have been so instructed by their mentors. These same individuals are likely to devote more of their time to graduate and post-graduate teaching – widely viewed as one of the rewards for increased emphasis on research activities – instead of to undergraduate education.

However, I hasten to make two major qualifications to these claims. First, this lack of allegiance to one's home institution in favor of national disciplinary peer groups is *not* universal, even among productive faculty – or perhaps especially not among highly productive faculty. Some faculty members – arguably many – somehow manage to do both. They maintain an active research agenda recognized on a national level. They also devote themselves to their students and their home institutions. But this kind of effort takes extraordinary energy, willpower, and motivation, and therefore is not as widespread as many, including me, would like it to be.

Also, a good case can be made that research and teaching are not only compatible but also mutually reinforcing. Someone who is in the midst of discovery, who is both excited and on the frontiers of knowledge, tends to be a better and more inspiring teacher. A student could have a no more electrifying experience educationally than to be in the class, even at the introductory level, of someone who is



**T**he first and most important step in reemphasizing undergraduate education involves reviewing faculty commitment to and identification with their home campuses.

both a gifted teacher and a gifted researcher.

Similarly, teaching is often the basis for research. In the sciences, students – yes, even undergraduates – often participate directly in research, helping foster new discoveries. Even in library-based disciplines, such as the humanities, one's understanding of an issue increases when attempting to explain it to bright students who are encouraged to ask difficult questions.

It may well be that charismatic teachers are born and not made; but with motivation and effort, good teaching can be learned – probably more easily than the ability to do good research. Willingness to critique oneself and to take constructive advice from students and peers seriously will, over time, lead to good teaching. Preparation, conscientiousness in grading, meeting with students, and advising are all time-consuming tasks. But they also are prerequisites for providing high-quality undergraduate education. I have seen new faculty members who are fearful in front of a class learn to present well-constructed lectures and interact superbly in discussion sections. Most universities have staff people who can assist in providing constructive criticism, and friendly peers are often helpful. But faculty members must be willing to reach out for such assistance and take it to heart.

#### **Possible remedies**

The first and most important step in reemphasizing undergraduate education involves renewing faculty commitment to and identification with their home campuses. It might be naive to think that this would automatically give rise to an increased willingness to commit the time and energy necessary for improving undergraduate educational quality, but it is a crucial step.

Of course, this renewed identification with the home campus is not a license to ignore disciplinary peer activities. Sound research often requires the collaboration and cross-checking of persons working on closely related problems; and with the division of knowledge and specialization that is occurring today, it is unlikely that such a group could be found locally.

Another long-term strategy will involve changing the graduate program culture that leads to disaffection with one's campus. Graduate schools and various graduate faculty committees need to focus strongly on this issue.

I also believe that commitment to undergraduate teaching can be strengthened and encouraged by an appropriate reward structure. In general, administrators should be responsible for providing faculty with the rewards and incentives that inspire faculty to offer their best, whether in research, graduate and professional education, or undergraduate teaching. Along with this, there needs to be a willingness to promote and tenure faculty who are good scholars *and* excellent teachers. At research universities, though not necessarily at universities that follow other models, a high level of accomplishment in the production of new knowledge is a requirement. But true excellence in teaching, especially undergraduate teaching, can and should play a prominent role. And I would go a step further: Promotion to the rank of full professor *primarily* on the basis of true and recognized excellence in teaching also should be possible at research universities. It is counterproductive that some universities promote only to the associate level and not beyond using this criterion.

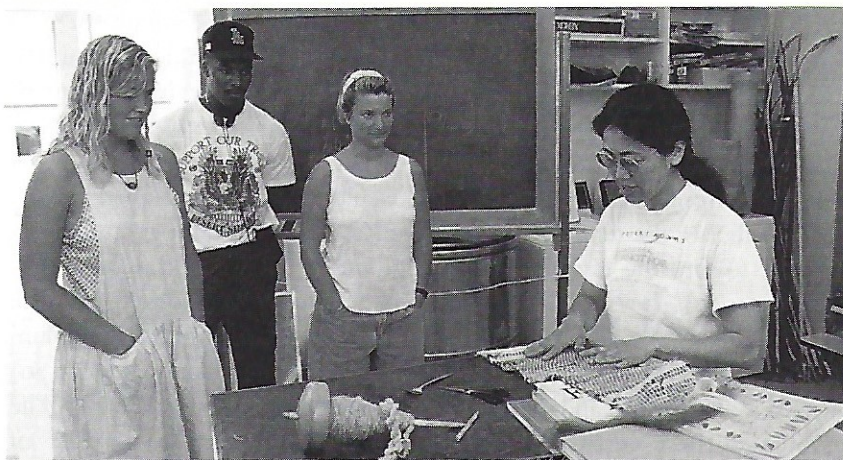
Group rewards for teaching excellence is a concept being dis-



cussed by member institutions of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges. This involves establishing a pool of merit pay, for example, that can be awarded to a department that has achieved noteworthy success at undergraduate teaching, curriculum reform, or innovation. This kind of group reward not only benefits individuals who display teaching excellence, but also provides reinforcement for the entire group – including colleagues engaged primarily in research – of the value of involvement in one's own institution. With sustained application, this and other tangible rewards for involvement and success in undergraduate teaching could, within a few years, have a positive effect on shifting faculty emphasis.

Proven methods for evaluating excellence in teaching are essential for any successful reform in the reward structure. Student evaluations tend to distinguish poorly skilled teachers from all others; they often fail to distinguish between average and good or excellent teachers. Thus, student evaluations should be used as only one instrument among many. A whole range of evidence can be put together to get a reasonably accurate picture of the quality of someone's teaching. For example, the success faculty members have in advising or working with graduate students or senior undergraduates on theses, the currentness of their syllabi, the innovativeness of their coursework, the success exiting students have later in higher-level classes, textbook and software production, and perhaps peer review, among others, are all useful measures.

The accuracy of this evaluation process, in fact, can duplicate that which we find in evaluating a faculty member's research. Except in cases of very senior scholars, the



**"The liberal arts college has much to offer...including a traditionally strong focus on high-quality undergraduate education."**

most faculty evaluation committees can realistically hope to say of a colleague's research is to place it on a five-point scale – that it is excellent, good, average, poor, or rotten. With sufficient evidence from many sources, using a number of instruments, faculty peer committees should equivalently be able to rank a colleague's teaching as excellent, good, average, poor, or rotten.

Evaluations should also take into account differences in career paths. Over the 30- to 40-year period that most faculty members engage in teaching and research, they can expect the proportion of their time spent in each sphere of activity to vary considerably. Sometimes one may have a great burst of creativity and productivity. During such times, it might make sense to concentrate on research more than on teaching. At other times, it is best to direct more energy to instruction. The goal should be to ensure that at any given time, the entire institution has a balanced instructional and research output. Again, not every faculty member has to maintain the same teaching/research balance in order for the institution as a whole to meet its goals of high-quality instruction and research. Recently, the Uni-

versity of California System, under the direction of Karl S. Pister, chancellor of the University of California at Santa Cruz, produced a study recognizing the difference in career paths of faculty members at various stages in their careers. ("Report of the University-Wide Task Force on Faculty Rewards." 26 June 1991. Office of the President, University of California, Oakland. 19 pp.) While some of the discussion is specific to the University of California System, there are lessons to be learned here for all research universities.

An additional step to be taken to reemphasize undergraduate education is to reinforce the idea of mission differentiation and multiple models. This is less an institutional step than one for state boards of higher education or boards of trustees. The research university model is not the only successful one in higher education. The liberal arts college has much to offer, for example, including a traditionally strong focus on high-quality undergraduate education.

Public institutions, too, can shape themselves into liberal arts colleges. There are many high-quality small public universities or colleges that could be enormously successful if they would embrace



the liberal arts college model. Urban universities, and even technical colleges and universities, should have similarly focused and directed missions. But in the absence of leadership from boards and key elected officials, the tendency is to gravitate toward the research university model. It is incumbent upon these external leadership groups to provide incentives and rewards, both in word and deed, to encourage these institutions to maintain their special focus and not give in to the pressures leading toward a single approach. I realize that this goal is more easily discussed than reached. Nonetheless, direction and leadership from external governing groups and campus leaders, using carrots more than sticks, should help us move toward acceptance of the need for differentiated missions among colleges and universities.

Much needs to be done at the campus level, as well. As noted earlier, the current phase of curriculum reform has mostly passed, except in key areas of multicultural education and internationalization. We are now at the stage of structural reform within institutions. Faculty and administrative leaders on campus can combine forces to identify ways to improve undergraduate education.

We have attempted to do this at the University of Oregon. Through a strategic planning process and much discussion (some of it contentious), we have moved toward what we call the "Oregon Model." This is an attempt to provide a number of structures that support high-quality undergraduate education. For instance, we form much of the entering freshman class into Freshman Interest Groups, or FIGs. Here, up to 30 students take classes together in areas of common interest. This

provides the opportunity for new students to become acquainted with one another in a "human-sized" setting, despite their attendance at a large institution. A faculty member is assigned to each FIG, thereby giving students a point of contact. Other aspects of the Oregon Model include capstone courses, some curriculum change, an orientation toward internationalization, and so on. The model also includes a series of faculty incentives – for example, teaching awards and support for curriculum development. Few of these activities are startlingly new, though they have taken on a size and shape that is appropriately unique to our institution. As a package, they signify the university's renewed and vigorous commitment to undergraduate education.

### **Complacency – the road to failure**

America's institutions of higher learning must reemphasize and revitalize undergraduate education. There are many reasons to do so. First, *it is the right thing to do*. High-quality undergraduate instruction is – or should be – a key mission of almost all colleges and universities. It should not be overridden by other factors, no matter how important or attractive.

Second, *refocusing on quality undergraduate education will have a salutary practical effect*. For many reasons, most of which are beyond our control, higher education in this country has fallen from its pedestal. Public and elected officials recognize that a research/teaching imbalance at some institutions threatens undergraduate education. Likely, the reasons are not well understood; but nonetheless, the problem is recognized. A rededication to undergraduate education

may renew public and official appreciation of higher education. Currently, prestige in the academy depends on the research prowess of an institution's faculty; but prestige and value in the public's eye often depend on the success of an institution's undergraduate programs. While no institution should make the changes I suggest here only to influence friends and government officials, such a benefit may be a side effect.

The 1990s, and probably beyond, will be a time of testing for higher education institutions. Increasing population growth in some areas of the country, decreasing numbers of 18-year-olds in others, fiscal constraints brought about by national and international economic conditions, changing workforce demands, and general loss of confidence in the higher education enterprise all speak to an environment in which complacency is the road to failure.

At a time when there is pressure to do more with the same or fewer resources, we must rededicate ourselves to assuring students that they will receive high-quality undergraduate educations. And this can happen in a truly satisfactory way only if faculty culture evolves toward a renewed commitment to undergraduate education. This, in turn, requires balancing the research portion of our missions with instruction and public service – in short, reemphasizing Aristotle's Golden Mean.

Loyalty and commitment to one's home institution, and especially to students, is of fundamental importance if this reemphasis is to succeed. Faculty leaders and administrative and external constituencies must find ways to support this end with realistic incentives. Hard thinking and forceful action are the order of the day. ■