



JUNE 2004

Emoryedge

IDEAS & OPINIONS FROM EMORY UNIVERSITY

Higher Education Is Obligated to Transform the World

BY JAMES W. WAGNER
President, Emory University

A few months ago, a young man asked me a difficult question: “Dr. Wagner, we seem to be living in a period of so much divisiveness. People are distancing themselves from each other, and wars and political conflicts abound. What is your plan for Emory to fix that?”

As much as I wanted to dodge his question, doing so would not relieve that nagging sense of responsibility that presses on those in positions of high privilege, that sense of responsibility that makes demands both of people and of institutions. “To whom much has been given, of them much will be required.” The link between privilege and obligation is inescapable and strong.

Is Emory privileged? You bet we are. Emory is privileged to be in Atlanta; it is privileged to employ some of the most highly qualified and productive teachers, scholars, and researchers in the world, as well as a cadre of talented and dedicated staff; it is privileged to have an impressive student population, a strong endowment, superb facilities, an excellent research base, a capable leadership team, and many valuable partners. We enjoy partnerships with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Carter Center, Georgia Tech, and local industries, as well as our civic organizations and government. Emory is privileged to claim a long tradition of valuing an education of the heart as well as an education of the mind. Emory has a sense of moral compass that is extraordinary. That sense of moral compass is especially extraordinary among universities whose values also include those necessary to succeed in a competitive academic research environment.

At the same time that we acknowledge our privilege, we should be challenged to fulfill our sense of obligation. Knowing that we are privileged, we must not—indeed, we cannot—avoid our obligation to address the question: “What can Emory do to help counter the forces of divisiveness and of isolation?” What is our responsibility to address those problems in the world?

I am convinced that higher education plays a role in the answers to these questions. Remember, higher education means more than just “advanced education.” Indeed, some of the most highly educated people I know do not hold advanced degrees. Universities in general, and Emory in particular, can combat the forces of divisiveness by recommitting to a genuine form of higher education, not just advanced education.

In the world of the university, we believe that higher education should prepare people to pursue truth, to understand the past, to seek and disseminate knowledge. Universities are rightly seen as environments for this kind of higher education because, at their best, they are:

- creators of the future;
- havens for free thought;
- discoverers and creators of knowledge;
- pursuers of truth; and
- providers of a liberal education.

As desirable and important as these characteristics are, they are only a partial portrait of the goals of genuine higher education.

Beyond those characteristics, higher education also should set us free from our self-centered universe; it should enable us to perceive the world from others’ perspectives and should empower us to make a positive impact on society. The true purpose of higher education is to lead us out of ourselves to a place where we can perceive the world from

others’ perspectives and have a positive impact on the community. Higher education is as much about insight as it is about gaining information; it is as much about wisdom as it is about seeking knowledge.

In this light, we can begin to see why higher education may address that questioner’s concern. Higher education teaches us that our own experiences and personal “database” are incomplete until we understand the needs, issues, and opportunities of others. Higher education—by strengthening communication and the bonds among us—weakens the forces that otherwise would pull us apart.

Being educated in the way I am talking about goes against our nature. We often prefer to be like infants who have all their needs met by others with no regard to cost or responsibility. Genuine higher education, though, will not let us remain self-centered and immature.

A “decentering” of one’s life is the goal of higher education—it is indeed an education about higher things and about understanding each other. Here at Emory, we commit ourselves in all that we do to teach and discover, to create, heal, and serve. We commit that our focus will be beyond ourselves.

In the health sciences, it is perhaps easiest to remember that our focus should be on others rather than on ourselves. After all, people do not make a career of public health, nursing, or medicine simply to be healthy themselves. Instead, they understand the critical need to get in touch with the needs of others, to understand them and to have a positive effect on another person’s universe of discomfort or disease.

In the practice of law, the focus is not on the attorney but on the needs of the client. In the study of business, the primary goal must not be about personal wealth but instead about generating wealth and doing so in proper stewardship and regard of the needs of the world. The key purpose is to prepare principled business leaders.

In the study of theology, the quest should not be toward personal piety alone but toward discovering ways to lead others to eternal truths. In the study of the sciences, the aim must not be to generate knowledge only for personal benefit but instead to add to the grand body of knowledge for the betterment of others.

And in the arts and letters, in the humanities, our obligation is not simply to entertain through art and writing and music and dance but also to offer unselfishly to the world tangible expressions of the mind, heart, and soul.

So, what was my answer to that young man? He got the short version; I told him, “I do not know for sure, but I do believe that genuine higher education is part of the answer.” When privilege and responsibility are held together, genuine higher education is a compelling answer to divisiveness and isolation in the world.

JAMES W. WAGNER, AN AWARD-WINNING TEACHER AND SCIENTIST, BECAME THE NINETEENTH PRESIDENT OF EMORY IN JULY 2003. WAGNER SERVED AS DEAN, PROVOST, AND INTERIM PRESIDENT OF CASE WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY, FOLLOWING A DISTINGUISHED TENURE ON THE FACULTY OF THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY, WHERE HE RECEIVED HIS PHD IN MATERIALS SCIENCE AND ENGINEERING. THROUGHOUT HIS ADMINISTRATIVE CAREER, WAGNER HAS WORKED TO ENHANCE THE UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE, ENCOURAGE RESEARCH, AND FOSTER MORE EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN THE ACADEMY AND LOCAL INSTITUTIONS, INCLUDING GOVERNMENT AND INDUSTRY. THIS PIECE IS ADAPTED FROM HIS APRIL 2, 2004, INAUGURAL ADDRESS.



FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT EMORY EDGE,
CONTACT CURT CARLSON AT 404.727.0334
OR EMAIL CCARLSON@EMORY.EDU.